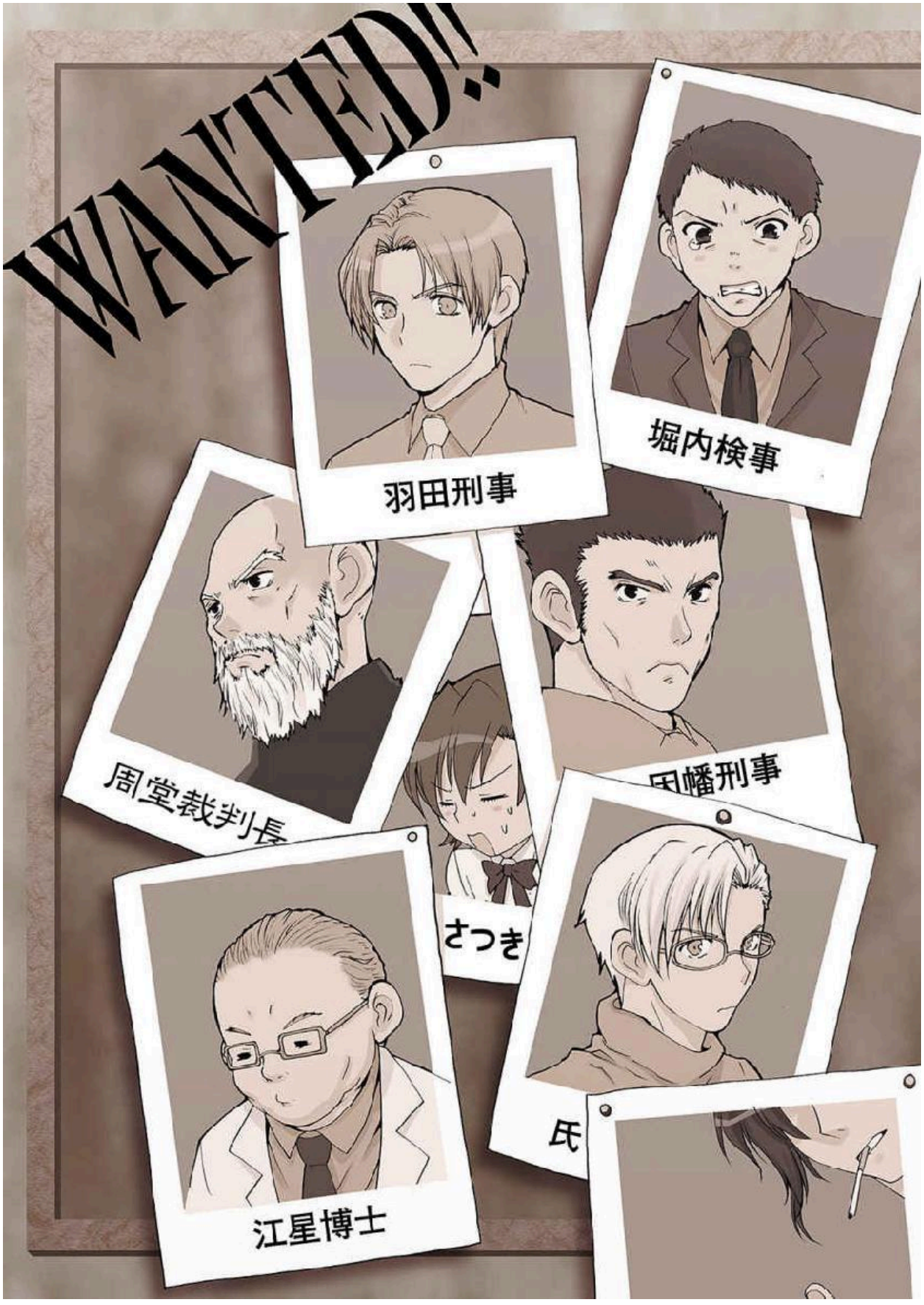
タクティカル ジャッジメント 7
Tactical Judgment
思いこみのリベンジ!
Toru Shiwasu
師走トオル
FUJIMI
MYSTERY
BUNKO

Tactical Judgment

「そんなに喜んでくれるとは光栄だ。
私もわざわざ君に国選弁護を
やらせにきたかいがあったというものだ」
ふっ
ふっ
ふっ
「本当にすいませんね
いつもいつも仕事を押し付けていただいて。
竹田先輩には申し訳ない気持ちで一杯ですよ」
は、
は、
は、


WANTED!!
羽田刑事
堀内検事
周堂裁判長
田幡刑事
さつき
江星博士
氏

Tactical Judgment Vol 7: Assumptions Challenged!

By Toru Shiwasu

Translated by waifutime

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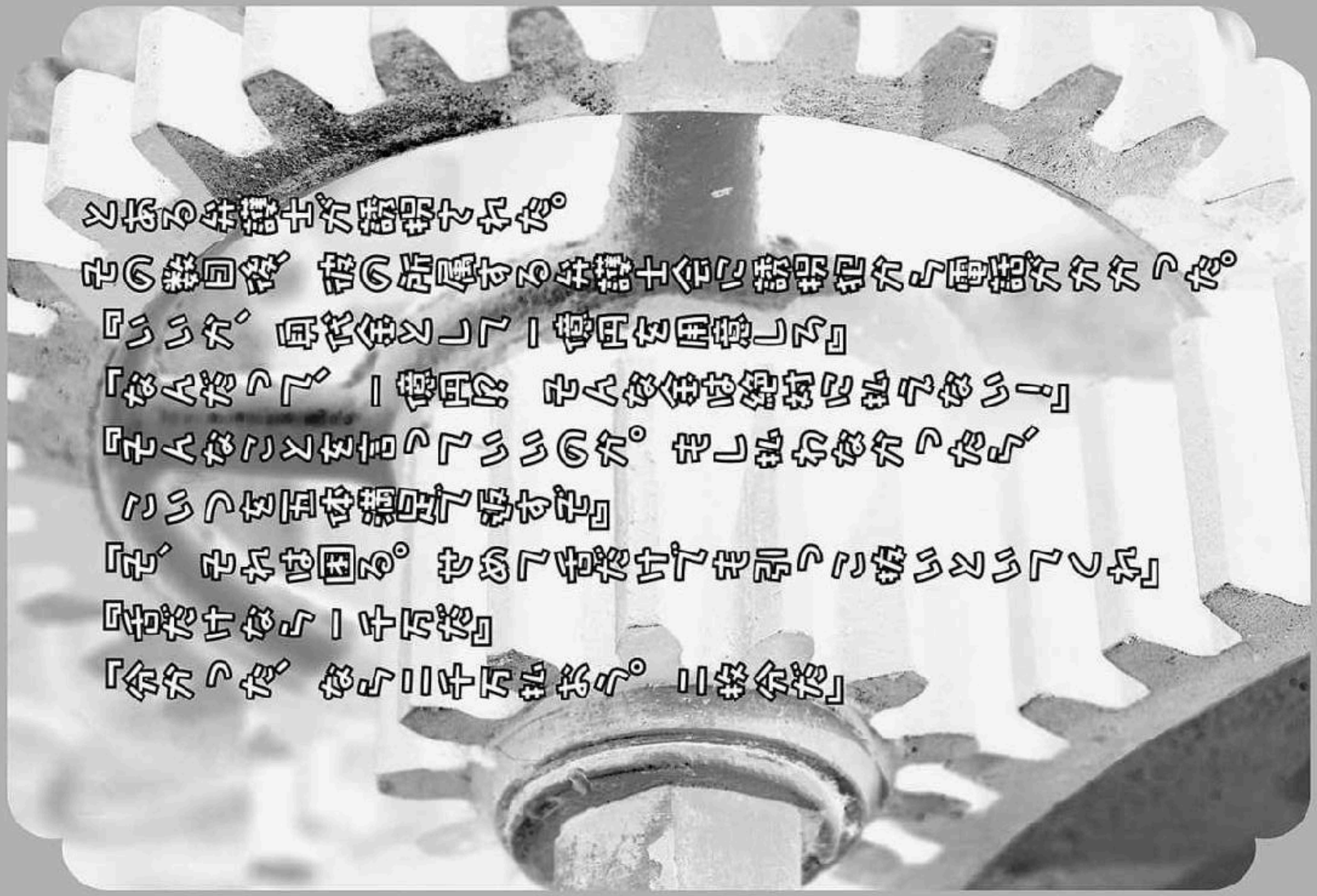
for the defense
for the prosecution
guest
登場人物
山鹿善行
弁護士
影野英治
私立探偵
皐月伊予
山鹿法律事務所の
不法侵入常習犯
水澄雪奈
山鹿の幼なじみ
氏神功徳
監察医。かつて山鹿、影野と共にホストリオと……
堀内健一
検事
毎度、山鹿に泣かされる。
得意な言葉は「異議あり」
天木誠一
鬼山和俊を殺害、自供した被告人
天木由美
天木誠一の妹
鬼山和俊
天木兄妹の叔父で、保護者
松井茂樹
鬼山和俊に頭が上がらない中小企業の社長
竹柴吉郎
同上
梅田和夫
同上


とある弁護士が説明された。
その数日後、彼の所属する弁護士会に脅迫状が届いたそうだ。
「いいか、日ぶんとして一億円を用意しろ」
「なんだって、一億円？　そんな金は絶対に払えない！」
「そんなことを言っていいのか。もし払わなかったら、
こいつを五体満足で返すぞ」
「そ、それは困る。せめて指だけでも引っこ抜いといてくれ」
「指だけなら一千万だ」
「分かった、なら二千万払おう。二枚分だ」

A certain lawyer was kidnapped.

A few days later, the kidnappers called the bar association he belonged to.

‘Listen up. Prepare six hundred thousand dollars as the ransom.’

"What!? Six hundred thousand dollars!! There’s no way we can pay that kind of money!"

‘Are you sure you want to say that? If you don’t pay, we’ll return him completely unharmed.’

"T-That would be a problem. At least pull out his tongue!"

‘If it’s just the tongue, it’s sixty thousand dollars.’

"Got it. Then we’ll pay one hundred and twenty thousand dollars. Make it two tongues’ worth."

Prologue

It was an unusually warm day for December.

That troublesome job came uninvited, showing up of its own accord.

December 17th, 9:05 AM, Yamashika Law Office

"Fwaaah..."

That day, I was lazing around at my desk, zoning out.

If there were any smart-mouthed middle schoolers from the Red Faction around, they might have thrown a snarky comment like, "Aren't you always slacking off?" But fortunately, I was the only one in the office. I could zone out without any reservations.

It's not without reason that I, who am usually brimming with energy, drive, ambition, and even a sharp edge, ended up like this.

Just yesterday, I had guided a trial to victory in a faraway place that took hours to reach by car. The fatigue from that still hadn't worn off, and I needed to rest.

Looking back now, that trial was really terrible. Although it felt good to win, it was physically and mentally exhausting.

With that as my excuse, I had no intention of working and planned to laze around. I had already done enough work this month, and I was even toying with the idea of not working for the rest of the year. Besides, Christmas was coming up, and even though it might end up being just a plan—saying it myself makes me sad—wouldn't it be more productive to come up with a date course with Yukina?

Just as I was thinking that.

The old door creaked with a groan, announcing the arrival of a visitor.

It wasn't hard to guess who it was. A regular visitor wouldn't enter without knocking, and Kageno or Satsuki wouldn't come this early in the morning.

As expected, it was Yukina who walked in.

"Good morning, Mr. Zenko."

"Ah, good morning."

Since I had been away in a distant place for the trial until yesterday, I hadn't seen Yukina. It was our first reunion in a few days, making it feel somewhat fresh.

"You're early today."

"The school stuff has settled down. I'll be coming around this time for a while."

"You know, you don't have to be here all the time. There's no need to clean every day, and we can just grab food around here."

Of course, in reality, I'd love for her to be here every day, from morning till night—or even sleeping here. But being the gentleman I pride myself on being, I decided to say that as a courtesy.

"No, it's fine. I like being here at the office."

She said something that made me happy. I wanted to say, "It's because I'm here, right?" but feared that even as a joke, being denied would cause me significant mental damage, so I decided against it.

…Why do I feel like I've become so timid lately? I used to be able to say those kinds of lines easily.

"Oh, by the way, did you see the news?" Yukina asked as she hung up her coat. "There was a murder case around here before you came back. They caught the culprit last night."

"Really?"

Murder case. If I were full of energy and had nothing better to do, I probably would have taken some interest in it.

But right now, both my energy and physical strength were drained, and I had absolutely no intention of working for a while.

Since it was Yukina's topic, I didn't plan on being rude, but no matter how much the murder case intrigued me, I couldn't bring myself to care that much.

"Um, just a moment. I think it was in this morning's paper..."

It seemed Yukina was really interested in the case. She picked up the morning paper that was lying on my desk.

"Let's see, somewhere around here... Ah, here it is. This."

She pointed to the front page and tried to show it to me. Inevitably, the distance between us diminished, and a sweet scent wafted into my nostrils.

…If my descriptions are oddly clichéd, it's probably because I'm still tired.

"Hmm, let's see."

Seiichi Amagi (20 years old) shot and killed his uncle and guardian Kazutoshi Oniyama (45 years old) with a shotgun. The motive, according to Amagi, was that Oniyama had killed his parents and embezzled their inheritance. However, the police have found no solid evidence to support the claim that Kazutoshi Oniyama killed Seiichi Amagi's parents. It goes on to say...

"This motive really caught my attention… If his parents were really killed, and their inheritance was embezzled… Well, I do think killing someone is going too far, but—"

"I see, that is a bit curious."

If your parents were killed and your inheritance stolen—anyone in that position would undoubtedly harbor murderous intent. Whether or not they'd act on it is another matter.

"But it's not uncommon for people to kill based on assumptions, and just reading this article doesn't tell me much. Besides, this isn't really my field, Yukina. The guy's already been arrested and confessed to the crime, so there's no room for me to get involved."

“But didn’t you defend someone before who had confessed to the crime and still got them acquitted?”

“That was a unique situation, and it just so happened to end in an acquittal. Things don’t always go that smoothly.

Well, I’ve done enough work this month, so I don’t mind taking a break from cases for a while. But Yukina, what I’m more interested in is this article over here—"

I was about to point to an article introducing a street that would be lit up for Christmas, a perfect date spot. Now, with no meddling detectives or pesky Red Faction middle schoolers around, this was a prime opportunity to get closer to Yukina.

But—at that moment.

The phone rang, not the usual one. Someone had come up to the building’s entrance and was calling in through the intercom.

And, as the office’s receptionist, Yukina naturally moved away from me to pick up the receiver.

"Hello, Yamashika Law Office."

…Lately, I've seriously started to believe that I'm cursed. A curse that ensures whenever I try to make a move on the girl I like, something inevitably gets in the way. It's happened so often recently that it can't just be a coincidence.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of people who might want to curse me. As an upstanding, righteous lawyer, I've led a life where no one could point fingers at me. However, like any hero of justice worth his salt, I've inevitably made enemies of many villains. While a curse shouldn't work on someone like me, if it's compounded by ten or twenty people… It's enough to send a chill down my spine.

And from my experience, I know that this curse has another effect.

When something interrupts at such a lousy moment, it's almost guaranteed that nothing good will come of it.

"…Huh? Yes, um, could you hold on a moment?"

Yukina turned back toward me, looking unusually flustered. From her expression, it was clear that this was not a welcome visitor.

"Who is it?"

"It's Mr. Takeda."

"Ugh."

Hiroto Takeda. He's the vice president of the bar association I'm a part of. As a lawyer, a profession known for its freedom, there's supposed to be no such thing as a superior. But thanks to the constraints of Japanese society, there are a few people I can't help but bow my head to. Hiroto Takeda is one of those rare exceptions.

"...Yukina, listen carefully. I'm not here. I'm bedridden at home with a cold from overwork. Tell him that and send him away."

"Well... he knows you're staying here, Mr. Zenko. He said to let him in immediately, and that any lawyer who would turn away a visitor during business hours isn't fit for the job..."

And so, my plan to pretend I'm not here was quickly foiled.

"Nothing else we can do. Let him in."

"Okay, understood."

Do I really have to see that damn unpleasant face first thing in the morning?

I seriously considered whether I should go to a shrine for some purification.

◆

Sitting on the sofa before me was a bastard who made me feel nauseous just by looking at him.

He was in his forties, but with a tall, slender build that didn't suit the word "middle-aged." His suit was crisply pressed, his hair was neatly parted, and he wore silver-framed glasses that gleamed dully. His sharp gaze, unbecoming of a lawyer, made him look like a villain. Every part of him screamed, "This man is a lawyer skilled in evil schemes." He was absolutely oil to my water, a lawyer of justice. Just breathing the same air in the same room made me feel like I might catch some terrible disease.

Especially this guy—whenever I finished a criminal trial, without fail, he'd have a go at me about the tactics I used in court. Apparently, he didn't like how I would protect the rights of the accused by any means necessary. Truly, a super conservative, a walking stereotype of the "King of Bastards."

"Yukina, I'm sorry, but could you step into the next room for a while?"

"Yes, understood."

Yukina obediently complied. I didn't want her to hear the low-level conversation that was about to take place here.

Once Yukina left, the man finally opened his mouth.

"Hey, good morning, Yamashika, my boy."

The moment I heard that line—a chill ran down my spine.

This guy just called me "my boy." And in such a polite tone. This wasn't just a bad premonition. It wouldn't be surprising if Satsuki turned into a giant and destroyed the Earth within five minutes.

"Well. It's been a while since we last met. How have you been?"

"I was fine until you showed up."

I immediately replied to his meaningless small talk.

Takeda shrugged and gave a bitter smile.

"Ah, that's a coincidence. To tell you the truth, the moment I saw your face, I felt nauseous, like my chest and stomach were churning. But I can't bear to dirty this shabby office any more than it already is. So, Yamashika, my boy, if you don't mind, could you cover your face with a towel or something?"

"In that case, wouldn't it be better to wrap your face instead? You're going to walk down the street after this, right? Don't you think it would be unbearable to make ordinary people suffer by seeing your face?"

"Hmm, it's good to see you're as lively as ever."

...Maybe I should just strangle this guy here and claim self-defense. "I had no choice, Officer. If I had continued breathing the same air in the same room as him, I would have undoubtedly rotted and died." No, that won't work.

"By the way, Yamashika, my boy. Does your office not even offer tea to visitors?"

"Unfortunately, I don't consider visitors who won't spend a single cent to be guests."

"That might be your definition, but don't you think that, from society's perspective, I should be treated as a guest? And yet, you don't even serve tea. Doesn't that prove you're a lawyer who doesn't understand social ethics? Oh, by the way, I prefer coffee."

...I can't believe he's bringing up social ethics over something as trivial as serving tea.

There were countless counterarguments I could have made, but engaging in a debate here would only force me to keep breathing this unpleasant air longer. I silently stood up and opened the door to the next room where Yukina was.

"Yukina. The guest would like some coffee. Sorry, but could you make it, even if it's just instant? With sugar, milk, and don't forget some salt too."

"O-Okay."

When I returned to the sofa, Takeda spoke again.

"You say strange things. Are you intending to put salt in the coffee?"

"No. I was just planning to sprinkle it after you leave."

"Is it a common practice at your office to sprinkle salt after a guest leaves?"

"Sprinkling salt after an unwelcome guest leaves is common sense in society, don't you think?"

"At the very least, I think most people would consider that to be rude."

"Oh, really? Then let me put it this way. I was lying when I said I'd sprinkle salt. I don't intend to do it at all; I'm just having it prepared. That's not rude at all, is it? And by the way, what I do after you leave is none of your concern, right?"

"It's good to see your sharp tongue is still in good shape. Without it, you'd have nothing left. I'm relieved."

I swore to myself that I would definitely sprinkle the salt.

"...Could we get down to business already?"

"Hmm, that's a surprisingly constructive suggestion, coming from you. Indeed, I don't have time to waste in a place like this, unlike you."

"You're the one who started this pointless conversation."

"Hmm, so I did. My apologies. I sincerely apologize. For some reason, when I see your face, I just can't keep quiet."

"..."

There are two kinds of people in this world I never want to talk to: prosecutors with slick tongues and lawyers with forked ones.

"Well then... Shall we get down to business? Do you know a man named Seiichi Amagi?"

Seiichi Amagi? Where have I heard that name before? Oh, right, I just saw it in the newspaper.

"You mean the murderer who shot someone with a shotgun?"

"Oh. I'm surprised you, of all people, know about him. I thought you were a more closed-off individual."

"I don't care what kind of prejudice you have, but for your information, I do read the newspaper."

"Oh. Not just the sports section and TV listings?"

"Too bad for you, I even read the comics."

"Oh, so you're a New York Times reader. Well, that makes sense. It suits you."

Takeda laughed thinly. It felt like he could see right through me, which pissed me off.

"Just so you know, I'm not dissatisfied with capitalism, and I'm not interested in our country's foreign policy."

"Indeed, you don't seem like a communist sympathizer. It's just that the New York Times fits your personality."

"Hmph. I bet you read the Wall Street Journal or the Washington Times."

"Oh, well done. I do indeed read the Wall Street Journal."

"Thought so. It suits your personality perfectly."

"I see. So one of the reasons we don't get along lies here as well. I hadn't realized."

For once, I agreed with him.

"Now, could we please continue the conversation?"

"Oh, sorry about that. For some reason, even though I'm nearing the limit of my tolerance for looking at your face, I can't help but add in some unnecessary remarks."

"That last one was another unnecessary remark."

"Oh, that's right. Very well, I'll get straight to the point. Defend Seiichi Amagi as a court-appointed lawyer."

"No way in hell."

"Then, I'll revoke your lawyer's badge for failing to fulfill your duties as a lawyer."

"I'll do it."

"Hmm, that's an unusually straightforward response."

"…You insufferable blockhead."

"What was that? Blockhead?"

"I said it's a *blockbuster* opportunity for me."

"I'm sure you did. I'm honored that you're so pleased. It feels like it was worth bringing this job to you."

"Hahaha, I'm really sorry, always having to take on the work you shove onto me. I feel so guilty, senior Takeda."

"Hahaha, we work in the same field, don't we? No need to be so reserved."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha."

"Hu-hu-hu-hu-hu."

At that moment.

Yukina entered, carrying a tray with coffee and green tea.

Then, she flinched and stepped back.

It seems she was frightened by Takeda's unsettling laughter. Damn you, Takeda, for scaring my Yukina like that—it's unforgivable.

"P-Please, go ahead."

Yukina nervously placed the tea down, and after making sure she had left this nightmare of a room,

"...Alright, enough joking."

I decided to move the conversation along.

"What was that? When were we joking?"

"Don't mess with me. There's no way I can take on a job like that. You know it too. I specialize in defending clients who plead not guilty. Why should I defend someone who's confessed to the crime?"

Takeda exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders.

"You're asking strange questions. Whoever it is, anyone who stands trial is entitled to have a lawyer to protect their rights. Whether the person admits to the crime or not is irrelevant. And you’re a lawyer, so there shouldn’t be any issue with defending them, regardless of who the defendant is, right?"

"But ignoring a lawyer's strengths and weaknesses isn't in the defendant's best interest. Don't make me repeat myself—I'm specialized in defending clients who plead not guilty. Let another lawyer take care of clients who admit to the crime."

"Oh my, perhaps I overestimated you. I thought you at least knew what it means to be a court-appointed lawyer."

"...Damn it, fine, I get it."

A court-appointed lawyer. It's a system where the state appoints a lawyer for defendants who can't afford to hire one due to financial reasons. Lawyers are apparently obligated to take on this kind of job from time to time, even though it doesn't pay well. I don't know much about it.

In other words, this glasses-wearing monkey Takeda is using the pretext of court-appointed defense to force this job on me.

"Now that you understand, let's talk a bit more seriously."

Takeda suddenly changed his tone.

"...What's this about?"

"It's about your remarkable track record. A defense attorney who's disgustingly *undefeated* in criminal trials, winning every case. That's you. Truly an unprecedented lawyer."

"...Did you just say something weird before 'undefeated'?"

"You're imagining things. Let me continue. So, this track record of yours where your clients always end up acquitted—this is a bit too dangerous for a lawyer, you see.

Do you understand what I'm saying? If this continues, the mere fact that you're defending someone will create the perception that your clients are innocent. That would be, shall we say, somewhat lacking in fairness, wouldn't it?"

"Hmph, so that's what you're getting at.

Listen, you know as well as I do that the conviction rate in criminal trials is over 99%. In other words, almost every prosecutor boasts an undefeated record, just like me. So, why shouldn't there be at least one undefeated lawyer?"

"A lawyer and a prosecutor are in different positions. And in your case, even if your client admits to the crime, you'd still get them acquitted, wouldn't you?"

"That's because it was the truth. I'm not so naive as to acquit someone who's truly guilty."

"In other words, you're saying that, when the time comes, you can take actions that don't bring shame to the legal profession, whether by encouraging a confession or by advocating for leniency?"

"Of course."

Takeda suddenly eased his expression.

"Is that so? I'm relieved to hear that. So, there's no issue with you taking on the defense of Seiichi Amagi, who's confessed to the crime, right?"

"...You bastard."

Damn it, he got me. Just because I'm still tired doesn't mean I should let a guy like this get one over on me. This is exactly why I can't stand other lawyers.

"Alright, fine, I'll do it. But I know you—this is already a done deal, isn't it?"

"No, no, not at all. If there's really some unavoidable reason, I'd ask another lawyer to take it on."

"Then, by all means, please do so. You know I was in another trial until just yesterday, and I'm exhausted."

"Oh, is that so? I didn't realize, sorry about that.

By the way, let me change the subject. Do you know why I didn't just handle this over the phone, but instead went out of my way to come to your office? It's so that I could immediately collect your lawyer's badge from a lawyer with zero sense of public duty who won't even take on court-appointed cases."

"I'll take the case."

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. Do your best."

Someday, I'll kill him. He's always using the threat of disbarment to force these shitty jobs on me. This is nothing short of coercion—this guy is the one who's lacking any sense of ethics. Ah, the world is such an unjust place.

<u>December 17th, 11:00 AM, Detention Center</u>

I’m rather fond of the title "undefeated lawyer." Sure, as long as I specialize in criminal trials, there’s bound to come a day when I taste defeat. In fact, there have been moments when I nearly abandoned the title of "undefeated."

But I’ve overcome many dangerous situations and managed to maintain that title. I’m not about to give it up now. Even if, this time, I have to defend a confessed murderer like Seiichi Amagi. No matter what, as long as I’m defending him, Seiichi Amagi has to be acquitted. No, he *must* be acquitted!

...Maybe that stubborn bastard Takeda pushed this job on me precisely because he knew I’d become obsessed with such a notion. But unfortunately for him, I find a certain pleasure in defying people’s expectations.

Sure, Seiichi Amagi might be a murderer. He’s confessed, and he shot someone with a shotgun, so it's probably true.

But even so, there are plenty of ways to get him acquitted. The most common is to claim self-defense, or to point out some illegality in the police investigation, or to argue that the defendant wasn’t in a sound mental state at the time of the crime.

Well, if he really did kill someone, then getting an acquittal might be tough, but at the very least, I could aim for a verdict where the sentence is suspended, or something where it’s clear that the defense has won from an objective standpoint.

With that resolve in mind, I waited with Yukina for Seiichi Amagi to arrive behind the glass. I was hoping that the man who would become my client looked a little unhinged, with a few screws loose in his head. If that were the case, it would make it easier to argue that the crime was committed by someone with a mental disorder. Of course, it would make for a rather unpleasant trial, though.

However, the moment I saw the man who entered accompanied by the police officer, I realized my initial hope was dashed.

The first impression might be something like, "He doesn't look twenty." He had the kind of calm demeanor that comes from a person who has endured hardships beyond his years. Simply put, he looked older than his age. He was slightly tall, with a build that was—well, above average, at least. He was far from the typical bookworm type.

Once the man seated himself firmly in the chair, he showed a slight hint of hesitation but quietly waited for me to start speaking.

"You're Seiichi Amagi, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Good. I'm Zenko Yamashika, the court-appointed lawyer assigned to your defense. Don’t worry, I won’t do you wrong, so let's work together."

Amagi's eyes widened in surprise.

"Could it be... Are you that lawyer Yamashika?"

"I don't know which 'Yamashika' you mean, but yeah, I'm probably that Yamashika."

"I've heard your name quite often on the news, Mr. Yamashika. I heard you’re a rather famous lawyer... But why would you defend someone like me? And I thought you only defended people who plead not guilty?"

"Like I said, I’m your court-appointed lawyer. You were told about the court-appointed defense system when you were arrested, right?"

"Yes, I was, sort of."

"That's what this is. It just so happened that it was my turn to take the case. In any case, there's nothing for you to worry about. You don't have to pay anything, and just because it’s a court-appointed case doesn't mean I can slack off."

"I see... I understand. Well, I’ll be counting on you."

He bowed his head, though it wasn’t a very polite bow. But then again, expecting proper manners from a twenty-year-old might be asking too much.

"Alright. Let’s get to the point. First, I want to ask you—did you really kill someone?"

"Yes, I did," Amagi nodded firmly.

"Are you sure about that?"

"I'm absolutely certain. I definitely shot my uncle with a shotgun. After firing, I confirmed with my own hands that he was dead."

This is bad.

"What was your state of mind at the time? Were you drunk, or were you mentally disturbed?"

"No, none of that. I’m sorry, Mr. Yamashika. I think you're trying to get me acquitted, but I was definitely in a normal state when I killed my uncle. And after doing something like that, I don’t intend to try and lessen my sentence at this point."

"Don’t say that. Doing time at your age would be tough."

"I appreciate your concern, but... I calmly planned it out, and I calmly killed him. While he was sleeping. I know well enough that claiming self-defense is impossible in this situation.

Besides, I don’t regret it. That guy deserved to be killed. I just killed someone who needed to be killed. And by making it public that I killed my uncle while I was in a normal state, it’ll also reveal to the world that my uncle committed a crime worthy of being killed."

This stubborn fool.

It doesn’t matter how terrible the victim was in secret. In Japan, except in cases of self-defense, no matter how justified the reasons for killing someone might be, you won’t be found not guilty. They say it’s the judicial system’s job to hand down punishment, and no one is allowed to take the law into their own hands.

This is a dangerous trend. As a defense attorney, I have to work to get the sentence reduced as much as possible, even if it means ignoring the wishes of my client. However, if I’m going to argue self-defense or mental disturbance, I absolutely need the cooperation of the defendant. As it stands, without a doubt, he’ll be sentenced to a prison term, and my flawless record will be tarnished.

"Hey, Mr. Amagi."

Suddenly, Yukina interrupted.

"I understand that you're prepared to accept your punishment. But there's one thing I'd like to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Do you have a girlfriend, or any family?"

"...I have a younger sister."

I realized Yukina's intention.

I see. In my search for a cunning strategy, I’d overlooked this simple and persuasive approach.

"Forgive me for being so direct, but how old is your sister?" Yukina continued.

"She’s thirteen."

"I see. She’s still at an age where she needs a guardian, isn’t she? But I read in the newspaper that your parents have already passed away, right? Do you have any other relatives you can rely on?"

"...What are you trying to say?"

"I'm sorry if I offended you, but I thought that you have a duty to get out of here as soon as possible and reassure your sister."

Amagi, apparently taken aback by this suggestion, showed his first sign of hesitation on his face.

"That’s... true. But that doesn’t mean I want to be found not guilty."

This stubborn fool.

"Fine, I get what you’re saying. But there’s no harm in getting your sentence reduced for your sister’s sake, right?"

"T-That’s true, I suppose."

"Then this should be easy. Let me help you with that as your lawyer. If it’s for that reason, there shouldn’t be any problem, right?"

This should work. With this reasoning, he has no grounds left to refuse.

As expected, Amagi hesitated for a moment but then slowly lowered his head.

"...Please take care of it."

Yukina and I exchanged glances and nodded.

"Alright, it’s settled. Let’s start with a strategy meeting."

"A strategy meeting...?"

"Yes, a strategy meeting. We need to think about how to present your case in court to reduce your sentence. First, I want you to tell me in detail why you killed the victim, how you did it, and how you were arrested."

"I see, that makes sense. So, I just need to tell you everything from the beginning?"

"Exactly. No matter how incriminating it might be, don’t hold anything back. You’ve already admitted to the crime, so there’s no need to lie now."

"Yes, I understand."

People have a bad habit of hiding things that are inconvenient for them, even when talking to their lawyer. But in this case, since he’s already admitted to the crime, I should be able to listen without much concern.

And so, Seiichi Amagi began to speak slowly.

"The beginning of it all... I suppose it started when my parents died three years ago."

第一部

被疑者・天木誠一

Tactical Judgment

第一章

殺意の胎動

メラトニン【めらとにん】

メラトニン(melatonin N-acetyl-5-methoxytryptamine)は脳の松果腺から分泌されるホルモン。睡眠と関連しており夜に高く昼に低く合成される。【効能・効果】睡眠導入のためのもの。不眠治療に用いられるメラトニンはヒトにおけるメラトニンの作用と同じ。【休薬期間】休薬期間によりリズム障害のリズムを示し、睡眠導入ができるようになる時のリズム障害のリズムがある。【前作用】

Part I: The Suspect, Seiichi Amagi

Chapter 1-1: The Seed of Murderous Intent

Three years ago.

My parents died. It was a traffic accident.

Before I talk about that day, I should first explain a bit about my family.

My family consisted of my parents, myself, and my younger sister, Yumi, who was seven years younger than me.

We lived in a newly built house with a garden, so at the very least, we were not financially troubled.

My father was an ordinary salaryman... or so I thought. Every morning, I would see him leave the house wearing a suit and tie, but like most children, I never knew exactly what kind of work he did. In any case, his job seemed to keep him busy, as he usually came home around 11 PM. It was only after his death that I found out my father had risen to the position of department head at a major company and was earning a considerable income.

My father, as much as it pains me to say, was frugal almost to a fault, with his only hobby being playing chess. I never saw him indulge in any wasteful spending. That said, he wasn't stingy; he was always generous when it came to buying things my sister or I needed. He particularly doted on Yumi, and I still remember how happy he was to dress her in an expensive kimono that cost tens of thousands of yen for a celebration festival. In short, he was a doting parent.

My mother... well, she was what you'd call an ordinary housewife. Every day she prepared meals, cleaned, did laundry, complained about her stiff shoulders as if it were a habit, occasionally leaving me to look after my sister so she could go out. I don't know how other mothers are, but I think she was a perfectly decent one.

My parents were what you'd call a loving couple. I never saw them argue. It might be a bit of a crude observation, but considering that my sister Yumi was born when I was seven, after fifteen years of marriage, I think that speaks to the strength of their relationship. Then again, I don't know much about other couples, so I can't say for sure.

And then, my parents died.

I remember that day three years ago very clearly. It was a Sunday, Yumi's tenth birthday. Unfortunately, my parents had some errands to run and were out during the day, but they were supposed to be back by evening so we could have a family birthday party that night.

But even as night fell, my parents didn't return, and my sister and I were trying to distract ourselves from our growing anxiety and hunger when the phone rang. It was the police.

It was a traffic accident.

Around 4 PM, while driving on a mountain road, they somehow lost control and crashed into a guardrail, plummeting down into a ravine. It took the rescue team about an hour to pull them out. My mother was already dead by then, and my father, unconscious, was rushed to the hospital—where he died that night without ever regaining consciousness, with Yumi and me by his side. I can still vividly recall the doctor's words, "He passed away at 12:37 AM."

At that time, I was seventeen, and my sister Yumi was ten.

I was still okay. After all, I was smack in the middle of my rebellious phase. Of course, I was sad about my parents' death, but I forced myself to be strong, thinking it would be embarrassing to cry. Still, memories of my parents would come back to me unbidden, and every time, I felt a burning sensation behind my eyes.

But my poor sister Yumi had it much worse.

At that time, she was only ten years old. She was at an age where she still wanted to be pampered by our parents, and our father especially doted on her. Losing both parents on her birthday, of all days, must have been an unimaginable sorrow. That day, she cried her heart out until she was too exhausted and fell asleep.

The next day, which was so busy it made my head spin, might have been a blessing for me, but it must have been an unfortunate day for Yumi.

There's a lot to do when someone dies. Besides the funeral, there are death notices, death certificates, and the procedures for cremation and burial. And then there's claiming the life insurance, handling the inheritance, dealing with inheritance taxes, and so on. There was no way I could let Yumi handle any of that, so I threw myself into the tasks with determination. After all, being busy helps distract from the sadness.

But during that time, Yumi was almost completely neglected. The day after our parents died, and with me being her only remaining relative, I should have done a better job of being there for her, even if just a little more.

For some reason, our family had very few relatives that we were in touch with. Of the four grandparents we should have had, only our paternal grandmother was still alive.

It was a relief that our grandmother came to help out with various things. Having lost both her husband and her only son, she must have been the one who most wanted to cry, but she never showed any weakness and helped us until the very end. However, that seemed to be just on the surface. When people become mentally exhausted, they quickly lose the will to live, and this grandmother passed away just a year after the accident, as if she were following in my father's footsteps. I was struck by how profoundly death can affect those left behind.

Also, when it came to life insurance and inheritance, both my grandmother and I were out of our depth, but a lawyer from the company my father worked for came and handled everything appropriately. I had thought that companies were cold-hearted toward employees who could no longer work, but this event made me feel ashamed of my prejudices.

There was, however, one issue. My sister and I were minors, and with our parents gone, we needed a guardian to take over parental authority.

I naturally assumed that our grandmother would become our guardian. But the first person to step forward was a relative we had never even met. It was my mother's younger brother—my uncle, Kazutoshi Oniyama.

My uncle was a single investor, and it seemed he was recognized among the relatives as being quite wealthy. Since he offered to take care of us, our grandmother, who was already elderly and unsure of how much longer she had left, stepped aside, saying there was no need for her to get involved. Looking back, I think my grandmother might have foreseen her own death at that point.

Kazutoshi Oniyama. He was in his mid-forties. True to the image of a wealthy man, he was a rather portly fellow.

Given that he willingly took in us orphans, I should have been grateful from my position. However, this man Oniyama had a sour face and an untrustworthy look in his eyes, so I couldn't bring myself to have a good impression of him.

But as someone who was now under his care, I had no right to refuse. And so, my sister and I were taken in by our uncle.

Our uncle's residence was so large that it might have been more appropriate to call it an estate rather than a house. There was no problem accommodating the two of us. In fact, I wondered why a single man living alone needed such a large house. I would later learn that it was purely for show.

So, my sister and I began our new life there—but...

Our uncle never starved us, nor did he ever abuse us. We never lacked money for what was necessary for a proper school life.

However, what we were given was only that—just material things.

Even though we lived together, the only time I remember sitting down to a meal with my uncle was the day we arrived at his house, when we ate sushi that had been delivered. It was almost as if he had no interest in interacting with us, to the point where I couldn't understand why he had taken us in. You could even say he treated us with hostility. The cleaning and laundry were left to the housekeeper, he always ate out, and whether it was a weekday or weekend, he was rarely at home; even when he was, he would shut himself up in his study. Despite living under the same roof, he felt like a stranger.

Well, as far as I was concerned, that was actually preferable. It would have been impossible to suddenly see my uncle as a father figure, and as long as my sister and I could stay together, I didn't feel all that lonely.

◆

It was probably about two weeks after we began our new life.

The phone rang.

"The investigation into your parents' accident has been completed, so I thought I'd at least give you a brief summary. Is anyone at home?"

It was the police.

"My uncle is out right now... Um, if possible, I'd like you to tell me."

"And you are? Could you be Seiichi Amagi?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I hate to put it this way, but the outcome may not be what you'd like to hear."

"...That's fine. Whatever it is, I need to know."

The police hesitated, but since it was the accident that killed my parents, they eventually told me.

"Understood. You do have the right to know.

I'll keep this brief. We thoroughly examined the tire marks left on the road at the scene and the car that fell into the ravine. As a result, we found out one thing."

"...What is it?"

"At the very least, the car your parents were in wasn't hit by another vehicle or anything like that, nor did the car have any mechanical trouble. The accident happened on a winding mountain road around 4 PM. You may have heard of this, but when you've been driving for a whole day, it's common to start feeling fatigued or drowsy around that time."

It wasn't hard to guess what the police were trying to say.

"So, you're saying the cause of the accident was... drowsy driving?"

"Yes, based on the circumstances, that's the only conclusion we can draw."

But at seventeen years old, I couldn't possibly accept that conclusion.

"No way! I've been riding in my dad's car since I was little. He never had an accident, and I can't recall him ever driving recklessly, not even once! If my dad ever felt sleepy while driving, he'd immediately pull over and rest. He was that cautious—there's no way he'd drive while drowsy!"

Maybe it was because I was overwhelmed by a sense of indignation, but I don't remember much of what happened after that. I vaguely recall them saying something like, "We understand how you feel, but this is the reality."

However, when I later calmed down and reflected on it, I realized there were some things that made sense.

At the time of the accident, my dad was still working overtime day after day. He had even come home late the night before the accident. And that day was Yumi's birthday. It's easy to imagine he was in a hurry to get home.

Lack of sleep, fatigue, anxiety. The thought that these factors combined and led to the accident started to make more sense to me, too.

Of course, there were still things that didn't sit right with me. For one, I never found out where my parents were headed that day, and I still couldn't believe that my safety-conscious father would cause an accident.

But no matter how dissatisfied I was, there was nothing I could do as a seventeen-year-old kid. Besides, if I made too much of a fuss, Yumi might figure out something was wrong. Knowing her, she'd probably end up blaming herself for our parents' deaths. I couldn't put any more burden on Yumi after she had just lost our parents.

In the end, I chose to keep what the police had told me to myself and carry on with our new life as if nothing had happened.

◆

Before I knew it, three years had passed.

By this time, the sadness had largely faded. At least for me, it had. As for Yumi, I felt like she had become much more subdued over the past three years. Still, when the two of us sat down to eat, she would smile, so I figured time would eventually heal everything.

But there was one problem.

By this time, my uncle's treatment of us had become noticeably worse.

We were still given enough to eat and didn't have to worry about school expenses, but whenever we ran into him at home, he would openly treat us with hostility. It became a daily occurrence for him to yell at us, calling us "nuisances."

That said, it wasn't really a big problem for me. After all, it's easy to avoid conflict if you just stay out of sight, and if I did happen to get yelled at, I could just brush it off with a simple "Alright, alright, sorry about that."

But Yumi wasn't as good at handling people as I was. For her, it was undoubtedly a terrible environment, and I felt like she was becoming even more withdrawn.

After graduating from high school, I quickly found a job.

Technically, my sister and I had the inheritance and life insurance our parents had left us. According to that lawyer, it was a considerable sum, even exceeding six hundred thousand dollars. However, since we were minors, our uncle, as our guardian, had control over the money, and we couldn't use it freely. But with only a few months left until my twentieth birthday on December 15th, I planned to take Yumi and leave this house as soon as I turned twenty.

But before that, there was something I wanted to save up for.

The trigger wasn't anything major. Around that time, I had bought a cellphone for work, and I had started exchanging emails with my former classmates from high school and my coworkers.

I never thought I'd become so hooked on texting, but once I started, I found it surprisingly convenient. Things that were hard to say out loud were easy to express in a text. I got so into it that I often stayed up late tapping away at the keys.

Then one day, I happened to send an email to my friends about my doubts regarding my parents' deaths. The police had thoroughly investigated the accident, but I still couldn't believe my father would cause an accident. I wondered if there might have been some other cause behind their deaths.

One of my friends responded with an interesting suggestion.

They said that nowadays, it's become more common for accident investigators and private detectives to be publicly recognized. They suggested that I might want to consider hiring a detective agency to investigate the accident.

It was a blind spot. I hadn't even thought of something so simple.

There was no chance that the police would reopen the investigation. If that was the case, I had no choice but to rely on an outside investigative agency. It's true that I'd been seeing more about accident investigators on TV and in books, so why not take advantage of that?

I made up my mind. I decided to hire a detective to re-investigate that accident, something I could no longer handle on my own.

◆

Looking back, I think I acted pretty quickly after that. I had no idea which detective agency was good. But after searching the internet, I found what seemed to be a major agency and made an appointment over the phone. By the following Saturday, I was already visiting the agency.

However—at the time, I was just nineteen. I had managed to prepare the payment for the commission, but I probably didn't come across as a particularly lucrative client.

"Pleased to meet you, my name is Hiromi Aizawa."

Perhaps because of that, the detective assigned to me was a young woman who didn't seem to have much experience as a detective. You could say I was given someone appropriate for my status.

For a nineteen-year-old, meeting a young woman might be considered a valuable opportunity, but that depends on the time and place. Since I was requesting an investigation into the cause of my parents' deaths, I would have preferred a more stereotypical detective with a sharp gaze and maybe a pipe in hand—someone who truly looked the part. After all, I was paying a considerable sum, enough to support my sister and me for several months. If they came back with a report saying, "We investigated, but couldn't figure it out," I would definitely lose my temper.

That said, I didn’t have the nerve to say something like, "I don’t want to leave this to you, could you introduce me to another detective?" in front of a young, beautiful woman. After the usual introductions, I started the conversation.

“I’d like you to investigate the accident that killed my parents.”

Maybe she didn’t expect such a serious request from a teenage client, because even the detective who introduced herself as Aizawa showed a look of surprise on her face.

“...Please tell me the details.”

The detective listened to my story with a great deal of empathy. She listened so intently that I began to have high expectations for the outcome of the investigation.

When I finished telling her everything, Aizawa promised, with a serious expression, that she would do her utmost to help.

◆

But—it was a case where the police found nothing. As expected, the report that came out a month later was not satisfactory.

The detective had hired an accident reconstruction expert, gathered eyewitness accounts, and reviewed the accident from every angle. But in the end, the conclusion was the same as the police’s: the cause of the accident was my father’s driving error.

“Regarding the case you requested, the above is the extent of our findings.”

Aizawa spoke in a heavy tone, perhaps to reflect my feelings.

“It’s unfortunate... but I believe there’s nothing suspicious about the accident that claimed your parents’ lives.”

“...I see.”

Both the police and the detective I paid a lot of money to had reached the same conclusion.

At this point, I had no choice but to give up. Neither my father nor my mother was killed by anyone. My father must have been exhausted from the overtime he’d been working day after day, and in his rush to make it home in time for Yumi’s birthday—somehow, he let his guard down, which led to the accident. I had no choice but to accept that.

Besides, it had already been three years since the accident. Now that I had been given such a clear answer, maybe this was a good opportunity to completely forget about the accident. I even began to think that.

However.

“Just... one thing, though.”

The detective spoke with a lack of confidence.

“As I mentioned, the investigation into the accident itself has been concluded. However, there is something that concerns me, though it’s unrelated to the accident. I don’t know if it’s connected at all, and this is just my personal opinion.”

“...What is it?”

“After your parents passed away, your guardianship was taken over by a man named Kazutoshi Oniyama, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“It’s about this Mr. Oniyama... he met with them.”

“...Met with them?”

“Yes. On the day of the accident, he met with your parents.”

I was shocked.

In other words, it’s like this.

On the day of the accident, where did my parents go and for what purpose? The detective investigated that and discovered that my parents had gone to Kazutoshi Oniyama’s villa—this was confirmed by an eyewitness account.

“W-What do you mean? Are you saying my uncle, that man, was involved in my parents’ deaths?”

“No, I can’t say anything about that at this point. The cause of the accident is undoubtedly inattentive driving, and we haven’t found any evidence linking Oniyama to the accident.

But it really bothers me. Mr. Oniyama met with your parents on the day of the accident, yet he hasn’t mentioned it to you at all, has he?"

“N-No, he hasn’t.”

“Doesn’t that seem... unnatural to you?”

That was exactly right.

My uncle took us in after we became orphans. He had no real obligation to do so. According to the detective’s investigation, my uncle was the person my parents saw last before they died. So why has he kept that fact a secret all this time?

Could it be that my uncle was somehow involved in my parents' deaths, and he took us in out of guilt? Such thoughts began to cross my mind.

“This is more of a hunch than anything, but Mr. Oniyama seems highly suspicious to me.

So... I’m really sorry to bring this up, but if you’re willing to commission us to investigate this Oniyama person, I’d personally be happy to undertake the task.”

At first, I thought I was being deceived.

I wondered if they were trying to take advantage of my lack of experience in the real world and extort more money from me under the guise of further investigation.

But the young female detective remained completely sincere. And it should have been clear at first glance that I wasn’t someone with a lot of money to spend. Despite that, she made this proposal, which meant she must have found something truly concerning.

In the end, I decided to take a chance.

I didn’t have any more money to pay, but they agreed to let me pay in installments, and the investigation continued.

◆

Half a month passed.

Though my uncle had emerged as a suspect, the biggest issue remained unresolved.

Namely, the cause of my parents' deaths was still determined to be drowsy driving. They weren’t hit by another car, there were no signs of tampering with the vehicle, and no drugs were found in their system. The tire marks left on the road also indicated that it was just an accident. In other words, there was no trace of my uncle being involved.

However, the detective uncovered new evidence that further implicated my uncle, from an unexpected angle.

“I first investigated Mr. Oniyama’s actions in the days before and after the accident. Given that it was three years ago, I didn’t have high hopes... but when I looked into his credit card usage, I found that four days before the accident, Mr. Oniyama had imported a certain drug. Are you familiar with melatonin?”

“...No, this is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“In short, it’s a sleep aid. However, its effects aren’t particularly strong. Melatonin is a substance that’s naturally secreted by the human brain when it recognizes darkness, inducing drowsiness—”

The detective went on to explain more about the substance’s properties, but it was complicated, so I don’t remember much of it. The only part that stuck with me was what she said afterward.

“—Since melatonin is a substance naturally produced in the human body, it has almost no side effects, and it’s absorbed quickly, so unless someone takes a very large amount, it’s unlikely to be detected in a drug test.”

“...So, are you saying there’s a possibility that my father was given melatonin?”

“Yes, that’s entirely possible. This melatonin isn’t as strong as some of the sleep aids sold here in Japan, so no matter how much you take, it won’t knock you out cold, but even a small dose is enough to induce a significant amount of drowsiness. And, as I mentioned before, since it’s a substance naturally produced in the human body, it’s absorbed quickly, and it’s unlikely to show up in a toxicology report. Especially since your father was taken to the hospital more than an hour after the accident.”

Another fact comes to mind here. Around the time of the accident, my father was constantly burdened with overtime, and even on his precious days off, he was driving from early in the morning. If my father, who was already sleep-deprived, had been made to take this melatonin, it must have been very effective.

My uncle had the opportunity to meet with my parents on the day of the incident. And by some coincidence, just a few days before that, he had acquired melatonin. Given all this, anyone would reach the same conclusion as I did: that man, Kazutoshi Oniyama, is the true culprit who drove my parents to their deaths.

"Ms. Aizawa. If I tell the police about this, do you think they will reopen the investigation?"

In response to my question, the detective shook her head regretfully.

"I'm afraid it would be difficult. It's true that Oniyama obtained melatonin. However, there is no way to prove that your father was made to take it.

Even if he had taken it, melatonin isn't a strong enough sleep aid to make someone lose consciousness completely. I hate to say this, but..."

"It's okay. Please, go ahead."

"I'm sorry, then I'll continue.

Even if your father was made drowsy by melatonin, the accident might have been avoided if he had just pulled over to rest. Considering that, it's honestly very difficult to get the police to act on evidence of this level."

It made sense.

Pull over to rest? If that day hadn't been Yumi's birthday, my father might have done just that... But that's still just speculation.

"However—"

Aizawa continued.

"Certainly, there are too many unknowns. But one thing has become clear about Mr. Oniyama's criminal actions—or rather, his motive."

I found myself staring at her face.

Perhaps embarrassed by my gaze, Aizawa averted her eyes and continued.

"It turns out that three years ago, when your parents died, Mr. Oniyama was in a very severe financial crisis. The reason wasn't anything special; he was simply caught up in the wave of recession that was sweeping the nation at the time.

The important thing is that around the time of your parents' deaths, Mr. Oniyama was in dire need of money.

What I'm about to say is partly my own speculation—"

"I-It's okay. Please, tell me whatever you think."

"…Your parents left behind a considerable inheritance, didn't they?"

"Yes, they did."

"Right after the accident, Mr. Oniyama became your legal guardian. Naturally, the inheritance should have gone to you and your sister, but until you both come of age, it’s managed by Mr. Oniyama as your guardian—did you know that?"

"Yes. I was told that when I was informed about the inheritance."

"Then this will be quick. Of course, this management doesn’t mean he can use the money as he pleases. If he were to use even a single yen without permission, it would immediately become a case of embezzlement. However, in practice, even if the inheritance was used without your knowledge, you wouldn’t have any way of noticing, right?"

A cold shiver ran down my spine.

"Well, yes, since my uncle manages the bankbook... N-No way!"

"Yes, I believe it’s just as you’re imagining. After investigating the bank transaction records, it became clear. Mr. Oniyama had been using that inheritance without permission."

I couldn’t sit still and shot up from my seat.

"I’m going to report this to the police. Please give me the report."

"Wait, Mr. Amagi. Even if you rush to the police now, they probably won’t take action."

"W-Why not!?"

"It’s true that Mr. Oniyama committed embezzlement. However, the way he did it was incredibly clever. He invested the inheritance in several companies. And—he made a huge profit. Enough to recover all the losses he had suffered before. As a result, your parents' inheritance hasn’t decreased at all. In fact, it has slightly increased."

"Even so, isn’t it still embezzlement?"

"You’re absolutely right. Mr. Oniyama was not allowed to use the inheritance. But he was allowed to manage it. If it’s under the pretext of being for your benefit, he could invest and manage the inheritance."

So, this is what it means.

It’s true that my uncle used my parents' inheritance without permission. But as a result, it didn’t decrease; it actually increased. If I were to confront my uncle about this, he’d easily brush it off, claiming he was just managing the funds for our benefit.

However, that’s just the outcome. If the man had failed in his investments, there’s no doubt that the precious inheritance left by my parents would have been completely wiped out—.

◆

That was the extent of the detective’s report.

This means my uncle had a motive to kill my parents. The motive, the means, and even the opportunity were all in place. My suspicions towards my uncle had grown to their limit.

Maybe it’s just because I’m young, but I don’t intend to cling to the inheritance that much. With what I’m earning now, I’m confident I could fully support Yumi on my own, and if my parents’ deaths were truly accidental and my uncle took us in out of pure goodwill, I might have been willing to give him at least my share of the inheritance.

However, if my uncle killed my parents for the sake of the inheritance, leaving Yumi an orphan, that’s a different story. Yumi has the right to a more affluent and comfortable life. That’s precisely why my father and mother left behind such a significant inheritance.

If that precious inheritance had been used for that man’s selfish desires, and if he were also responsible for my parents' deaths, then it’s absolutely unforgivable.

Even if it’s just circumstantial evidence, there’s so much of it.

I waited until Yumi was out of the house and finally decided to confront my uncle.

“I know you met with my parents on the day of the accident. I’ve also discovered that you obtained melatonin a few days before that. On that day, you made my father take melatonin, causing the accident, didn’t you? All of this was to get your hands on my parents' inheritance!”

The moment I accused him, I was certain that my uncle was the culprit. His face turned pale in an instant, and he stiffened.

But then—my uncle quickly regained his composure. No, perhaps I should say he brazenly acted as if nothing had happened.

"I didn’t do anything. It’s true that I met with your parents on the day of the accident. It’s also true that I obtained melatonin. But the melatonin was for my insomnia; I never gave it to your parents. Or do you have any proof that I made them take the drug?

And I haven’t touched the inheritance at all. I’ve managed the assets as necessary, but the inheritance hasn’t decreased at all. In fact, I should be asking for a management fee. You can inquire with the bank if you like."

He completely denied everything.

Since all I had was circumstantial evidence, there was no way to counter him at this point. The only change in his demeanor was the pale expression he showed right after I confronted him. For me, that was more than enough proof of my uncle’s involvement, but the police probably wouldn’t take action. If I had managed to get a confession, the voice recorder hidden in my pocket would have come in handy, but my uncle never once uttered a word that suggested he was involved in my parents' deaths.

Even so, I was sure of it. This man made my father take melatonin, leading to the accident that killed him. All of it was to get his hands on the inheritance.

Once again, anger began to well up inside me.

He killed my parents, made my sister so miserable, used their precious inheritance for his own selfish desires, and yet he feels no guilt whatsoever.

I can’t forgive him. No matter what, I couldn’t be satisfied until he paid for his crimes.

However, I could no longer find a way to make that happen. To get the police involved, I would need more definitive evidence. But there was nothing more I could do about the incident that happened three years ago.

Why is it that my uncle, after driving my parents to their deaths, can live each day so brazenly? I can’t say I don’t understand; after all, there’s no longer any way to prove his guilt.

Even so, I wasn’t lenient enough to just let it go, and I was racking my brain on how to accuse my uncle—when it happened.

Just thinking about it makes me sick to my stomach—there was an absolutely horrific incident.

◆

It happened completely by chance.

It was about a month after I had confronted my uncle.

It was around 8 PM, and I was about to go to the bathroom.

I saw it.

That man was in the changing room.

By itself, that wasn't so strange. But at that time, Yumi was in the bath!

What that man, that bastard Kazutoshi Oniyama, was doing in the changing room—

He had his face buried. In her underwear.

Never in my life had I seen such a disgusting scene. A large, middle- aged man had his nose buried in a small piece of cloth, breathing heavily with a look of ecstasy on his face.

Needless to say, the only woman in the house who would have worn that underwear was Yumi.

In other words, the underwear that man, Kazutoshi Oniyama, had his nose buried in was—

A fierce, overwhelming rage began to bubble up inside me, just as intense as when I first became convinced that my uncle had killed my parents.

Thinking back, the way that man looked at my sister—his gaze strangely low—certainly had something suspicious about it.

A horrifying thought crossed my mind. Could my uncle be trying to make a move on my sister? No, it's possible that he already did something while I was out. Could Yumi's sudden introversion be because of that?

But then I reconsidered. Even the thought of such a thing was repulsive, but if his actions were limited to just touching her underwear, it was unlikely he had directly harmed Yumi yet. Besides, over the past three years, I've seen Yumi every day, and there was never a time when her behavior suddenly changed.

But what about the future? What if that man tried to assault Yumi in the future?

And I knew—Kazutoshi Oniyama was the kind of person who could easily do such a thing.

At this point, I made a decision.

I had been thinking about it all along. How could I bring that man to justice and make him pay for his crimes? But I never found the answer.

But now, I reconsider.

I had overlooked something very simple.

Knowing who he truly was, I couldn't allow him to stay near my sister for even a second longer. On top of that, he was also my parents' enemy.

However, there was no way to hand him over to the police. But making him pay doesn't necessarily mean handing him over to the police.

It's simple.

I, with my own hands, will administer punishment to that man.

Yes. I will kill him.

When I first realized this solution, I was overcome with self-loathing. How could I not have thought of such a simple method until now?

It's a simple matter. In today's world, there are countless ways to kill someone. Poisoning, stabbing, beating, strangling, drugging.

I had no hesitation or doubt. That man deserves to die. He's someone who should not be allowed to live. And I will be the one to carry out that sentence.

Even if, as a result, I end up getting caught, I would make the same claim. That man deserved to die, and that's why I killed him.

Life is equal, no one has the right to take another person's life—people would say that. They would say it's madness to act as God and carry out the death penalty.

I don't expect anyone to understand, nor do I need them to. I will kill him. To make him pay for my parents' deaths. And to protect my sister. That's all.

Starting the next day, I spent every spare moment thinking about how I would kill Kazutoshi Oniyama.

Of course, as a precondition, I had to avoid any method that would lead to my being arrested as the perpetrator. Going to prison for the crime of killing a person who deserved to die would be too much of a loss. And there's Yumi to consider as well. I couldn't allow her to be labeled as the sister of a murderer.

To kill someone in a way that doesn't reveal me as the perpetrator—in other words, a perfect crime. It's a phrase often seen in TV shows and books, but I never thought I would actually have to do it myself.

However, carrying out a perfect crime is incredibly difficult.

For a while, I secretly observed Oniyama's movements, not only to protect Yumi but also to look for an opportunity to kill. However, the results were not promising.

Oniyama was already wealthy enough not to need to work, and he had no regular routine at all. One day he would wake up at 8 AM, and the next day he would wake up in the afternoon. He always ate out, and he went out whenever he felt like it. And no matter where he went, he always drove.

It was absurd. I considered staging a robbery and killing him while he was outside, but with his erratic behavior, it would be difficult.

If it were just about killing him, it would be easy to execute. Since he definitely comes home and sleeps every night, I could sneak in while he's asleep and stab him once—that would be enough. Or I could put poison in the alcohol in the refrigerator.

But if I did that, my sister and I, who live with him, would be the first suspects. I thought about creating an alibi and killing him, but it was impossible to come up with a natural alibi that wouldn't draw suspicion not only to me but also to Yumi. I was absolutely furious with the existence of Oniyama.

But then, one day, the opportunity suddenly presented itself.

◆

"Hey, you two, come here for a minute."

It was December—specifically, Tuesday night, the 10th of this month—when Oniyama called me and my sister with his usual rude attitude.

"This Saturday, some guests are coming over. They're going to stay the night, so you two should stay in your rooms and sleep early. Got it?"

There was nothing particularly unusual about that. This unnecessarily large house had five guest rooms, and Oniyama often invited guests of unknown origins, drinking and playing mahjong until late at night. Since the house was well soundproofed, it wasn't too noisy, but if I went out into the hallway, I could sometimes hear their ridiculous laughter, and Yumi seemed even more nervous than usual and had trouble sleeping. It was definitely a nuisance for us.

But still, that weekend, huh. It was unrelated, but that Sunday was my 20th birthday.

"What kind of guests are they?"

I figured anyone associated with this guy couldn't be good company, but I asked anyway.

"They're executives from a company I have shares in. They're my clay shooting buddies. We're going to have a competition over the weekend."

Oniyama seemed oddly excited.

But it was an unexpected statement—clay shooting? I had no idea Oniyama had such a hobby. I've lived in the same house with him for years and never noticed. Or maybe he started recently? Well, whatever he does during the day, it wouldn't be surprising.

"That's how it is. They're all just presidents of small-time companies, so there's no need to act subservient, but don't do anything that would embarrass me!"

My uncle shouted loudly for no reason, frightening Yumi and further intensifying my desire to kill him.

After returning to my room, I suddenly became curious and decided to look up information about clay shooting online. Since clay shooting obviously involves using guns, I wondered if there was a way to use that to kill him. That was my motivation.

Clay shooting is a sport where you use a shotgun to shoot at flying targets that look like plates. A shotgun is a gun that fires many small pellets at once—I knew at least that much. But as I researched more about shotguns, I found some interesting information.

I had always assumed that clay shooting was done at some specialized range where you rented a shotgun. But that was wrong. There isn't a single place in Japan that rents out shotguns. In fact, renting guns is illegal. If you want to do clay shooting, you have to apply to the police for a gun license, pass several tests, and then acquire your own gun.

This means that if my uncle does clay shooting, he must own his own shotgun. It's not just my uncle—his friends who are coming over must also be the same.

When I learned this fact, it felt like pieces of a puzzle were coming together in my mind.

I became obsessed and continued researching gun ownership.

If you own a gun, you're required to strictly manage it. Well, of course—letting a gun be easily accessible would be a serious problem.

Not only is it forbidden to let someone else hold your gun, but even letting them touch it is prohibited. When storing the gun, you're required by law to keep it in a designated storage place that meets certain standards—a gun locker—or entrust it to a professional for safekeeping.

However, the regulations for storing shotgun shells are a bit more lenient. That said, you still need various permits to purchase them, and you're required to store them separately from the gun in a secure place—like a safe.

There are also rules about carrying guns. You can't carry a gun without a purpose, and of course, you're not allowed to carry one for self- defense. In fact, you can't even get a permit to own a gun for self- defense in the first place.

Naturally, if your purpose is to shoot, it's okay to carry both the gun and the ammunition with you. Also, if you need to stay somewhere with your gun, for example, for hunting or clay shooting, it's okay as long as you conceal the gun so that others don't know you're carrying it.

As I researched this, I remembered my uncle's personality.

To do clay shooting, you need to own your own shotgun. If you store a shotgun at home, you're required to have a gun locker. Although entrusting it to a professional is an option, knowing my uncle's personality, that's unlikely. He's probably locked himself in his room, polishing his gun with a look of satisfaction. In other words—there's a very high chance that there's a gun in this house right now.

And that's not all. Oniyama said that his friends would be doing clay shooting throughout the weekend. That means several people with their own shotguns will be staying in this house on Saturday night.

All the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

I think this is what they mean when they talk about a divine revelation. At that moment, the plan to kill my uncle came together in my mind.

What did my uncle say about the people coming over? Executives from a company he owns shares in? And that mocking tone of his. There was no doubt about it—some, if not all, of the guests coming tomorrow definitely don't think well of my uncle.

Though it's not a verified fact, the relationship between a shareholder and a company is like that of an employer and employee. There's bound to be at least one or two disputes. In other words, if Oniyama were killed tomorrow night, the police would be more likely to suspect those guests than us. There couldn't be a better opportunity.

As for the method of killing—the research on shotguns provided a good idea.

For example, a handgun has grooves in the barrel called rifling, which spin the bullet to increase accuracy. When a bullet is fired from a handgun, these grooves leave a unique mark on the bullet called a rifling mark, or striation. By matching these striations, they can determine which handgun fired the bullet.

However, with a shotgun, there's no need to worry about rifling marks. A shotgun scatters small pellets, and due to its construction, the pellets don't have any marks like striations. In fact, shotguns don't even have rifling in the barrel.

In other words, tomorrow night, there would be several shotguns in that house. If my uncle were killed with a shotgun at that time, the suspicion would naturally fall on the people staying in the house with their shotguns. Moreover, since it would be impossible to determine which gun fired the shot, the investigation would inevitably become more difficult. At the very least, the suspicion that would fall on Yumi and me, who have never touched a shotgun, would be minimal.

The plan was coming together rapidly.

First, I would find the shotgun that was likely in the house. I'd make sure it was ready to be used at any time, wait for Saturday night, and then shoot my uncle.

It's a simple plan with no alibi. But the circumstances would cover up my crime.

And so, from the very situation my uncle had created, my plan for the perfect crime was taking shape step by step.

I felt incredibly good, as if a bone that had been stuck in my throat had finally been removed.

Before going to bed, I exchanged the usual ten or so emails, but apparently, my emotions were reflected in my writing, and everyone asked, "Did something good happen?"

Oh, something did happen. It's a shame I couldn't explain it.

◆

The next day. I left work early and came home. Oniyama had gone out somewhere, and Yumi hadn't returned from her club activities yet.

Since Oniyama wasn't home at this time, he was almost certainly out drinking, which meant he would be back late. Yumi wouldn't be back for a while either. That left me with only one thing to do. I put on gloves and sneaked into my uncle's private room. I needed to find the gun locker.

Sure enough, I found it easily. In my uncle's study, there was unmistakably a locker. It was about a meter high, smaller than I had imagined.

I had always been forbidden from entering this study. Well, I never had any reason to go in, so I hardly ever did. But even after living in this house for three years, I had seen the inside of the room a few times. The last time was about two years ago, I think, and back then, there hadn't been any locker like this. This means my uncle must have developed his interest in clay shooting within the last two years. Not that it mattered.

The problem was how to open it. Naturally, the gun locker was locked. I had to find a way to open it by Saturday night, no matter what.

I tried bending a wire and sticking it into the keyhole, but as expected, it didn't open at all. I couldn't just smash it open, so I had no choice but to find the key.

But where on earth could the key be?

Where would my uncle place the key? I tried to think like my uncle.

My uncle's personality is careless, lazy, and yet self-centered. In a way, he's a very easy-to-understand person. If someone like my uncle put a lock on the storage locker for his beloved gun, where would he put the key?

Normally, you'd think a keychain. If you carry a keychain and wallet together, there's almost no risk of them being stolen. That would be troublesome, but...

But would that Oniyama really keep it on a keychain?

Let's assume he attached the gun locker key to a keychain and carried it with his wallet.

When my uncle comes home, he goes to his private room first. He either falls asleep there or changes into loungewear before coming out to the living room or his study.

The gun locker is in this study. If he feels like messing with the gun, he'd have to go get the keychain just to open the locker. I can't imagine my uncle choosing such a troublesome method.

He'd definitely leave the key in this room so the locker could be opened anytime he came in. Knowing his lazy nature, there's no doubt about it.

Having reached that conclusion, I began searching the room. Fortunately, there wasn't much in the room. A bookshelf, a computer, a large desk with a pen holder, and a chair. A few decorative items as well.

Yet indeed, it was only a matter of time before I found the key. On the desk, in a small tray that looked like an ashtray—amongst coins and paper clips—was a small key, carelessly placed.

I inserted the key into the locker. It opened surprisingly easily. I had been tormented by that man's sloppy personality for the past three years, but this time, I was grateful for it. He could reflect on it in hell for all I cared.

Inside were what looked like shotguns. Two of them.

They were big. Or rather, long. Much longer than what you'd see in movies or TV shows. They were probably about a meter long. They were so large that you'd almost think they were used for sniping or something.

I quickly crouched down to pick up one of the shotguns. But at that moment—

I banged my head on something.

It was already getting dark, and because the locker was in a dimly lit spot, I hadn't noticed, but there was a shelf above the locker for storing small items. I must have hit my head on it when I bent down to grab the gun.

I panicked, thinking I might have broken something, but luckily, it seemed there was nothing to worry about. What surprised me more was the box on that shelf.

It was labeled "No. 9, 12-gauge." It was a box of shotgun shells.

I nearly burst out laughing. My uncle had stored the gun and its ammunition in the same place. That's a clear violation of the law. But then again, this is the same uncle who carelessly left the locker key out in the open. He probably prioritized convenience over following the law.

I almost felt like reporting this to the police. If I did, his gun license would probably be revoked, and I could at least make him face some consequences.

But then again, what I needed to do wasn't some petty revenge like that. Instead, I should be glad that I didn't have to go through the trouble of finding the ammunition.

I picked up the two shotguns once again.

One of them looked like an ordinary shotgun with nothing particularly unusual about it. But the other one had two barrels stacked vertically.

According to what I found online, there are mainly five types of shotguns. First, there's the over-under type, where the barrels are stacked vertically, and then there's the side-by-side type, where the barrels are aligned horizontally instead. Apparently, under Japanese law, it's illegal to

own a shotgun that can hold more than three shells in the magazine, and since two shots are more than enough for clay shooting, these double-barreled guns are widely used.

Then there's the semi-automatic shotgun, which uses the gas pressure generated when a shell is fired to eject the spent shell and load the next one automatically. There's the pump-action shotgun, often seen in movies, where you manually cycle the action by sliding a pump-like handle back and forth to eject and load shells. And finally, there's the lever-action shotgun, frequently seen in Western films, where you use a lever to eject and load shells.

The shotgun with the barrels stacked vertically must definitely be an over-under type. It's the most commonly used gun in clay shooting. The other one, which looked ordinary, was probably the semi-automatic type.

Well, whichever one I end up using, the operation doesn't seem to be all that different. You load the shells, release the safety, and pull the trigger. The only difference is how you eject the spent shell, but I'm only going to fire one shot anyway.

Now that I had confirmed the guns and ammunition, I closed the locker, returned the key to its original spot, and left my uncle's study.

To be absolutely certain, I would have liked to make a duplicate key, but I had to give up on that idea, considering the risk of leaving evidence that I made a copy. I could only hope that the key would still be in this spot on Saturday. I didn't think my uncle was the type to suddenly get the whim to change where he kept the key. It should be fine.

After leaving my uncle's room, I returned to my own room and continued planning.

I had confirmed the location of the guns and ammunition. I had researched how to use them.

The biggest problem now was that I couldn't do a test shot.

I considered taking the gun out to some mountain and firing it, but my uncle might come home while I'm out, and someone might witness me shooting. There's even the possibility that a policeman might catch me while I'm carrying the gun.

The risk was too high. I'd have to shoot without any practice. Since I had already figured out how to fire the gun from the internet, there shouldn't be a problem.

The other unknown is the power of the ammunition. Since it's called a shotgun, the pellets spread out when fired. The question is, from what distance should I shoot to maximize the lethality?

The shotgun shells I found in my uncle’s safe were labeled "No. 9, 12- gauge." These are apparently frequently used in a type of clay shooting known as skeet shooting. The "12-gauge" refers to the bore diameter, while the "No. 9" refers to the size of the individual pellets.

To be more specific, "12-gauge" means the inner diameter of the barrel that can fire a lead ball weighing one-twelfth of a pound, and "No. 9" means the pellet diameter is 2 millimeters. Well, the standards seemed to differ slightly depending on the country, so I didn’t fully understand it myself, but…

Ah, who cares about these numbers? What matters is that it shoots. There’s no other ammo available, and the most important thing is whether this ammo can kill a person.

To be honest, I had doubts about whether 2-millimeter pellets could kill a person, but after doing some research, it seems I didn’t need to worry. While it might be somewhat underpowered for hunting wild boar, there have been several real cases where people were killed at close range, so it shouldn’t be a problem.

The issue is how close "close range" actually is.

Judging from various accounts, it seems that if you shoot from a distance where the muzzle is almost touching the target—within a meter— the human body would literally be blown away. Not just hands and feet, but if you shoot the head, it would explode like a watermelon rigged with explosives.

I even read stories about people being cut in half if shot in the torso, but to be honest, I can’t imagine that a mere 2-millimeter lead pellet would have that much power. That must be when using larger pellets.

However, even though a shotgun doesn’t leave much evidence, if I get too close to my uncle, I might leave some subtle evidence that even I could overlook.

Apparently, even with just 2-millimeter pellets, they can fly straight for about 40 meters, so I don’t think I need to get that close. My uncle’s bedroom is unnecessarily large, and from the door to the bed, it’s roughly... at most, about 10 meters. With this, I could probably shoot from the doorway without even entering the room.

So, the method I was considering was... something like this.

Saturday night. I wait until everyone is sound asleep, then first take the gun out of the locker and head to my uncle’s bedroom. I open the door, and from there, position the muzzle so it just peeks inside, then shoot my uncle lying in bed. This was probably the optimal way.

I considered the possibility that the recoil from the shot might throw off my aim, but after some research, it doesn’t seem to be much of an issue. Shotguns have been improved in various

ways, and there are even stories of children in other countries easily handling clay shooting. Moreover, shotguns are designed so that many pellets are fired to increase the hit rate. Even if the aim is slightly off, it shouldn't be a problem at all. Depending on the gun, a 12-gauge shot spreads to about 50 centimeters over 30 meters. At 10 meters, it spreads to less than 20 centimeters. Even with poor aim, it should be enough to hit.

Now, are there any other issues that need to be considered... let's see, first there's the issue of gunpowder residue.

When you fire a gun, the gunpowder explodes, and the residue from the burnt powder scatters everywhere. By using certain chemicals, this gunpowder residue can be detected on the muzzle or clothing, revealing whether a gun was used. This is what's commonly known as the gunpowder residue test, something that's almost always mentioned in mystery dramas involving guns.

So, what should I do about this gunpowder residue? I know the police will come the day after the murder. At that time, it shouldn't be a problem if they check the shotgun for residue. After all, it's a gun my uncle regularly uses, so it's only natural for there to be some residue. I plan on wiping the barrel with a cloth just in case, though.

However, if they check the clothes I was wearing during the crime for gunpowder residue, I'm done for. It's not just the clothes. Gunpowder is likely to stick to my body or hair as well.

After some thought, I decided to buy two cheap T-shirts. I'll wear one normally, and the other, I'll cut two holes in it and tie the neck part to wear it over my head like a balaclava. After I shoot my uncle and it's all over, I can burn this shirt and flush it down the toilet. Buying a shirt shouldn't draw any suspicion from the police, and since I usually wear T-shirts as pajamas, it won't look suspicious either. The sight of me with a shirt over my head might look pretty ridiculous from an outsider's perspective, but this plan was essentially a failure if someone saw me anyway, so there was no need to worry too much about that.

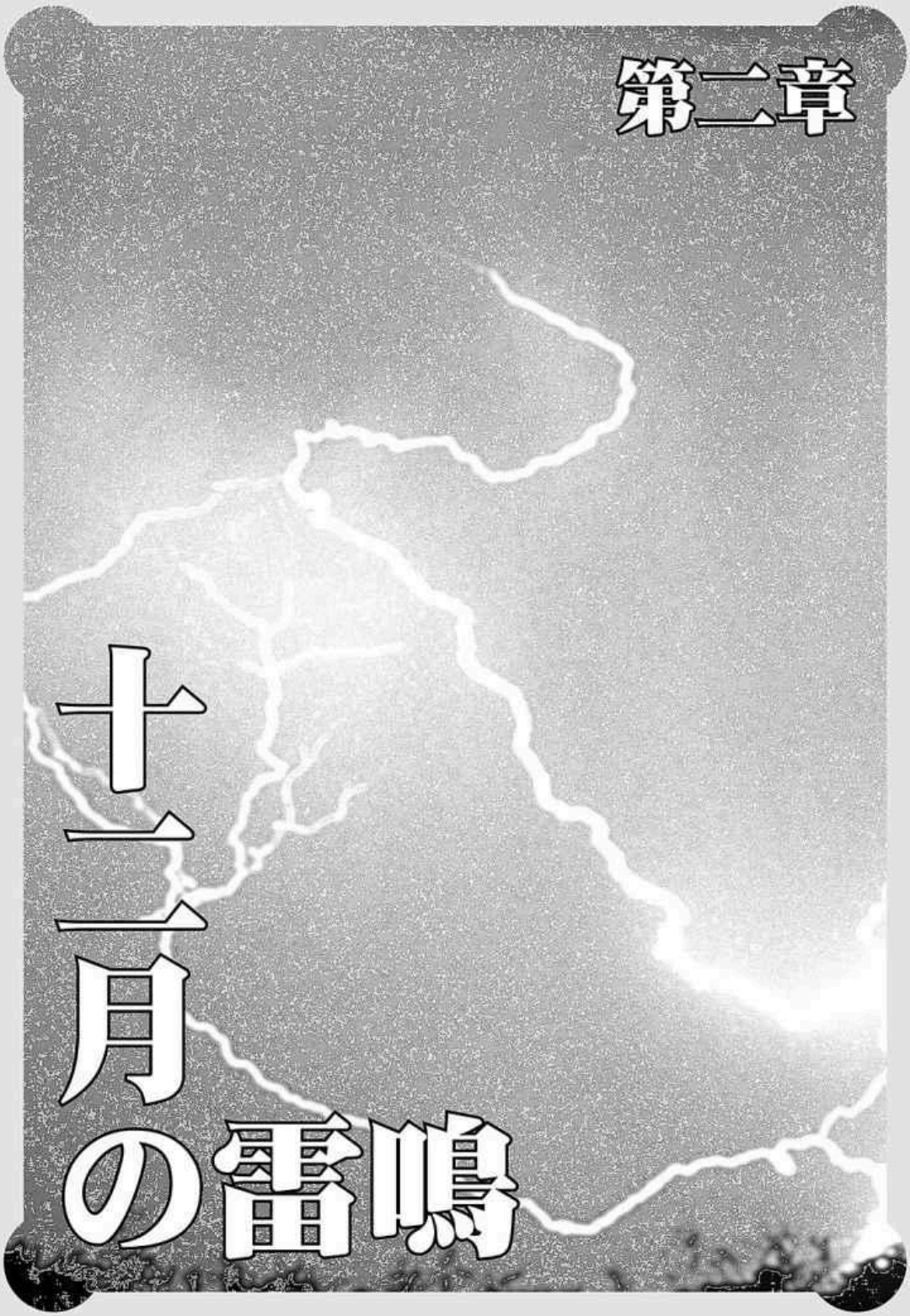
The one problem I couldn't do anything about is the gunshot sound. Since the gunpowder exploded, it was bound to make a pretty loud noise. But fortunately, this house, which had a ridiculous amount of money spent on it, was strangely well soundproofed. Also, I had seen clay shooting on TV a few times, and it didn't seem like the noise was that loud. Plus, it would be the middle of the night, so even if there was a loud noise, it shouldn't be a big deal. For instance, if I heard a loud bang in the middle of the night, I'd just think it was some idiot setting off fireworks and wouldn't bother to get up and check. Besides, as long as I could shoot and kill my uncle, put the gun back in the locker, hide the shell casing somewhere, and make it back to my room in time, that's all that mattered.

If I could do that, even if the police come, it'd be difficult for them to figure out which shotgun fired the shot, and since my sister and I didn't own any shotguns, there was no risk of us being suspected.

It may not be perfect. But there's no better plan than this.

That’s what I thought.

Until that day.


第二章
十二月の雷鳴

Chapter 1-2: December’s Thunder

Judgment day had arrived.

I was so excited that I didn’t even feel embarrassed using such an expression.

Saturday, December 14th. The weather was clear, and it was so warm it felt like early summer. According to the weather forecast, it was supposed to rain heavily at night. That would actually work in my favor—if the sound of the rain covered up some of the noise.

Inside the house, nothing was different from usual. My uncle had left early in the morning, and Yumi had also gone out around noon because she had club activities.

Since it was a Saturday, the housekeeper wasn’t around either. I ended up being left alone in the house, something I hadn’t expected. Of course, that was more convenient for me.

After all, I had to work hard to suppress the grin that kept creeping onto my face since morning. The thought that I would finally be able to kill that man today made my body tremble with joy. Maybe this is what they call the "warrior's tremble."

While no one was around, I was able to rehearse the plan several times. Fortunately, the location of the gun locker key hadn’t changed today either. My uncle must have taken the over-under shotgun for clay shooting because it wasn’t there, but the semi-automatic shotgun was still in place, along with the remaining ammunition. I had thoroughly checked how to release the safety and load the shells.

All the preparations were complete. Now, I was just anxiously waiting for night to come. I hoped my uncle would enjoy himself as much as possible today, whether clay shooting or whatever. After all, it would be his last day on earth.

However, when you’re hyped up, a day can feel incredibly long. Even after repeatedly reviewing the plan, it was only around four o’clock. I tried sending some text messages, but since it was Saturday afternoon, everyone was busy hanging out, and no one replied.

With nothing else to do, I decided to kill time by watching TV. Over the past few days, while I was engrossed in planning how to kill Oniyama, some interesting news had been circulating. Apparently, in a somewhat distant prefecture, a famous lawyer—someone whose name I’d heard a few times—was defending a client who had been acquitted once before but had been arrested again on murder charges. There it was, that lawyer again. It’s too amusing. That lawyer must definitely be up to something shady behind the scenes. Otherwise, there’s no way he could keep winning so many acquittals.

As I was thinking about this, evening finally arrived, and Yumi came home, signaling that it was time for dinner.

On weekdays, we eat the meals prepared by the housekeeper, but on weekends, we either eat out or cook together as siblings.

Today, I suggested we go out and eat something delicious.

“Did something good happen, big bro?” Yumi asked.

“Yeah, something like that,” I replied vaguely. The good thing was about to happen, Yumi.

And then, finally.

Finally, the long-awaited night arrived.

As predicted by the weather forecast, rain clouds had gathered, and the sky was devoid of stars or the moon.

At 9 PM, my uncle came home, laughing like a fool, completely unaware of what was about to happen.

Without needing to be told by my uncle, my sister and I quickly retreated to our rooms, not wanting to see his face.

Just to be sure, as I headed back to my room, I took note of the guests my uncle had brought along. There were three of them. One was a big guy, another was tall and lanky, and the third was a bit chubby. They all seemed to be in their forties, not much different in age from my uncle. Though my memory was a bit hazy, I recognized all three of them. They were probably people my uncle had brought over before.

11 PM.

When I slightly opened the soundproof door, I could hear loud, idiotic laughter and shouting coming from the living room. Most of the loud voices were my uncle’s. Just as I thought, those three were in no position to oppose my uncle. Thinking about how they had to spend the whole day with him, I couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for them. And to top it off, they would be treated as suspects by the police tomorrow. I didn’t hold a grudge against them personally, so I felt a little guilty. If any of the three got arrested, I hope that lawyer who always gets people acquitted would defend them. Well, ultimately, it was just their bad luck. On the bright side, after today, they’d never have to put up with my uncle again.

Around this time, just as the weather forecast predicted, the rain started pouring down. And it wasn't just a drizzle; it was a heavy downpour.

What's more, it wasn't just the sound of the rain that I heard. The sky started flashing, and thunder began to rumble.

Could it be because of the unusually warm winter? A thunderstorm out of season.

Why is it that when things are going so well, everything falls into place? The only uncertainty left in my meticulously reviewed plan was the gunshot sound. Thunder is something that flashes in the sky, and a few seconds later, the rumbling sound follows. As long as I timed it right, I could easily mask the sound of the gunshot. Though I'm an atheist, at that moment, I couldn't help but feel that even the heavens were supporting my cause.

11:50 PM.

The rain intensified, and the thunder grew even louder.

It's not like they were scared of the thunder, but by this time, the rowdy noise from the living room had died down. I had expected my uncle to drink until morning, but maybe even he needed to prepare for tomorrow.

Anyway, all that was left was to wait for everyone to fall asleep. Considering they'd been drinking, it shouldn't take too long. They'd probably all be sound asleep by 2 AM.

Eventually, the date changed. It was now midnight on December 15th. I almost forgot, but it was also my twentieth birthday. To think that on this day of all days, I would commit murder—what a stroke of luck. It was the best birthday present I could ever ask for.

Normally, this would be around the time I'd go to bed, but I didn't feel sleepy at all, probably because I was so excited. To calm myself down, and to avoid acting suspicious by breaking my usual habits, I started texting my friends as I always did.

However, around 12:20 AM, something unexpected happened.

The thunder started to gradually quiet down.

In hindsight, it was a simple matter. Thunderstorms end once the storm clouds pass. The longer I waited, the quieter the thunder would become, wasting the precious noise.

At this point, I was forced to make a decision. Should I wait until around 2 AM when everyone was definitely asleep, despite knowing the thunder would be gone?

Or should I take advantage of the rain and thunder now, even though it was earlier than planned, to mask the sound of my footsteps and the gunshot?

...I couldn't make up my mind.

It was true that waiting until 2 AM, when everyone would be surely asleep, might be safer. But then again, those three guests were sleeping in unfamiliar beds. What if one of them couldn't fall asleep? Now that I think about it, they must be used to hearing shotgun blasts. If they heard a gunshot in the middle of the night, they might jump up to see what was happening. Maybe I was overthinking it, but it would be better to minimize the number of uncertainties.

After all, I should carry out the plan right now. There was a chance that not everyone was asleep at this hour, but as long as I didn't bump into anyone in the hallway, with this heavy rain and thunder, they shouldn't notice a bit of noise. Besides, even if I waited until 2 AM, there was still a chance someone might wake up to go to the bathroom.

And more than anything, this unseasonable thunderstorm began on the very night I planned to kill Oniyama. Could this not be a sign from the heavens? I think someone in China once said something like, "If one does not accept what Heaven bestows, they will bear its reproach." It seemed clear to me that I should not let this opportunity slip by.

12:30 AM.

I changed into the shirt I had bought and put on gloves, and finally, I left the room.

I walked down the dimly lit hallway. I couldn't turn on the lights, but it was my own house, one I knew like the back of my hand. There were no obstacles.

Thanks to the heavy rain and thunder, I couldn't even hear my own footsteps. Naturally, there were no signs of anyone else, and I reached the first target location—my uncle's study—without any issues.

If my uncle had, on some whim, moved the gun locker key to another place, the entire plan would be ruined. But that worry was unfounded. The key was in the same place as always.

I opened the gun locker.

To my surprise, just like during the day, there was only the semi- automatic shotgun. What had happened to the over-under shotgun? What happened to the rule that guns must be stored in the gun locker? Well, he probably took it to his room to prepare it for tomorrow's clay shooting, or maybe he was just too lazy to put it away. Either way, it didn't really matter at this point.

I took the gun, borrowed a shell, closed the locker, and left the room. Now, I headed for my uncle's bedroom.

Every time the sky lit up, my shadow holding the gun was projected onto the hallway.

Here I was, a man with a gun walking down an empty hallway in the middle of the night, as thunder roared outside. If anyone saw me now, there would be no excuse. I silently prayed to the one who had caused this thunderstorm tonight that no one would get up to use the bathroom.

As I walked, I measured the intervals between the lightning and thunder. How many seconds after the flash did the sound of thunder reach me? If I understood this, it would be easy to mask the sound of the gunshot. It was about five seconds.

Finally, I reached the door to my destination.

There had been some minor changes, but everything was going according to plan so far.

I turned the doorknob slowly, carefully, to avoid making any noise. I knew my uncle wasn't the type to lock his door. OK. The door opened without a sound. I peeked inside through the narrow gap.

It was too dark to see clearly, but I could make out my uncle's bed. The large, overly luxurious feather bed in the right corner of the room. There, on top of it, was his figure. It seemed he was sleeping on his right side, facing away from me.

His large body moved slightly.

For a moment, I held my breath, thinking he might get up, but fortunately, it seemed he just shifted in his sleep.

Suddenly, I remembered something. Why, I don't know, but I recalled a night at a forest camp when I was young. During those events, the first person to fall asleep would be the target of pranks all night long. But sometimes, the sleeping person's body would twitch suddenly, just like now, and it would startle us. It's strange what comes to mind at a time like this. Is it a kind of life-flashing-before-your-eyes moment?

Anyway, now that I knew the target's position, I pulled myself together and closed the door again. Finally, it was time to load the shell into the gun—

But I couldn't do it. For some reason, the shell wouldn't go into the chamber.

"...Hah, hah."

Before I knew it—I realized my breathing had become completely erratic.

And not just that. My hands were trembling.

What a mess. All I have to do is kill the person I'm supposed to kill. I don't feel any pangs of conscience, and there's no audience watching me. So why am I so nervous?

"Phew..."

I took a deep breath. I repeatedly clenched and unclenched my hands.

The trembling hadn't stopped, but it was better than before. I managed to load the shell into the gun and disengaged the safety.

Then I put on the second T-shirt I had prepared, pulling it over my head. My field of vision narrowed a bit, but it wouldn't affect my aim.

I slowly opened the door again, just a crack.

I raised the gun. I held the barrel with my left hand and pressed the stock against my right shoulder. I inserted the gun barrel through the gap in the door, aiming the muzzle at the center of my uncle's body—around his back.

All that was left was to pull the trigger. Perhaps because I felt reassured by the weight of the gun, the barrel didn't shake much.

Then, I waited for the next lightning, taking deep breaths.

I would pull the trigger five seconds after the next flash of lightning. That was all it would take to end everything.

The sky lit up.

But I was so focused on controlling my breathing that I couldn't start counting the seconds. Well, that flash wasn't very big. The sound probably wouldn't be that loud either, so I'll wait for the next one. The sleeping uncle didn't seem about to wake up, and at this point, I could take my time.

I controlled my breathing and waited for the next lightning strike. They say a second feels longer when you're tense, and that was exactly my state right now. My uncle didn't seem likely to wake

up, but if anyone saw me standing here in this ghostly outfit with a shotgun in my hands, there would be no possible excuse.

Hurry up, let the next lightning strike soon.

I don't know if my prayer was answered.

A particularly bright flash of lightning illuminated the area.

This time, I wouldn't miss it. I readjusted my aim and started counting the seconds. Five seconds until the thunder. Four, three, two...

But then.

Something unexpected happened.

My uncle's body moved again, just a twitch.

It was nothing, really—he must have been having another weird dream, just turning over in his sleep.

But at that moment, I was at the peak of tension—I didn't know what was happening anymore.

Why had the sleeping uncle moved? Wasn't it a sign that he was about to wake up? What if he suddenly got up before the thunder struck? What if his sudden movement threw off my aim when I fired? What if he screamed when I shot him? What if, what if, what if? What if, what if, what if!

I completely forgot to count the seconds.

Before I knew it, I had pulled the trigger.

The shotgun roared in the dark room.

I snapped back to reality when I heard the loud, dry bang right next to my ear.

The empty shell ejected from the barrel, and a smell like rotten eggs—probably from the gunpowder—filled the air. The recoil from the shot must have been strong because a dull pain shot through the shoulder where the stock was pressed, but that pain was a minor issue.

So this is the sound of a shotgun? It wasn't just loud—it was deafening. It was so loud that I thought it must have echoed not just down the hallway but throughout the entire house.

And then it happened. It felt like a long time had passed, but in reality, it was probably less than 0.5 seconds.

The thunder, which was supposed to cover up the gunshot, rumbled loudly. It was so loud that I wondered if lightning had struck somewhere nearby.

I was off...!

What a mess. All it took was my uncle's body moving just before I pulled the trigger, and I became this flustered.

...Uncle?

That's right, what happened to my uncle? What do I think I just did? I shot and killed my uncle.

According to the plan, I was supposed to leave immediately. But with a gun, you don't get a sense of the impact. I couldn't be sure that I had actually killed him. What if I failed? What if he was still alive?

Following the plan, I first picked up the spent cartridge. I thought it would be quite hot, but maybe because I was wearing gloves, I didn't feel it at all.

I approached my uncle's bed. I needed to confirm it for sure. It was fine, I was just getting closer. The floor was hardwood, and my head was completely covered with a shirt. There shouldn't be any traces left behind. Even if there were some traces, this was my house too, so there was nothing unnatural about it.

I went right up to the bed.

The room was still pitch dark. My eyes had somewhat adjusted to the darkness, but even so, all I could see was the outline of my uncle lying in bed. I couldn't distinguish any colors, so I still couldn't tell if my uncle was dead.

There was just one strange thing. There was a black hole in the blanket that was covering my uncle.

Resolving myself, I brought my right hand, which was still holding the spent cartridge, closer to the hole.

"Ah!"

The moment I touched it, I was startled and pulled my hand back. There was a sticky sensation even through the gloves.

I immediately realized what it was. There was only one possible explanation.

Blood.

At that moment, I noticed the scent of blood spreading around me.

And my uncle was completely still. He wasn't moving even slightly like before, and most importantly, he wasn't breathing.

There was no doubt. My uncle was dead. I had killed him. Finally, I had done it.

Maybe because I couldn't actually see the gruesome body, I didn't feel any guilt. Instead, I felt a surge of indescribable fulfillment.

But now was not the time to get lost in emotions. The gunshot had been so loud, and it pained me that the thunder hadn't completely masked it. It wasn't impossible that someone might come running. Given that the thunder had been rumbling like this, and it was a time when everyone would normally be asleep, I figured it would be fine, but...

In any case, staying here any longer would only make things worse.

I gave my uncle's corpse one last glance, then left the room.

◆

I did it. I finally did it.

Filled with indescribable excitement, I followed the plan to dispose of the evidence.

First, I wiped the gun as thoroughly as I could with the shirt. This was to avoid leaving any traces of gunpowder. Then, I put the gun back in the locker, returned to my room, and hid the spent cartridge. I had already decided where to hide it. I regularly read thick monthly manga magazines. I had hollowed out the inside of one of those magazines to create a cavity. In there, even if the police searched the house, they would never find it. Moreover, it would be easy to take it out of the house without arousing suspicion. Later, when I had the chance to go out, I could discreetly dispose of it along with the magazine.

Next, I rushed to the bathroom and set fire to the blood-stained gloves and the shirt that likely had gunpowder residue on it with a match. Once they had burned down to a certain extent, I flushed the ashes down the drain.

Everything went according to plan. Now there was no evidence anywhere that could prove I was the perpetrator.

With a clear mind, I returned to my room.

Now everything was done. All I had to do was act normal when the police came tomorrow.

I suddenly noticed that I had several unread messages on my phone. It must have been because I had rushed out earlier when I realized the thunder was moving away.

Considering the interrogation I'd face from the police tomorrow, I should probably get some sleep to conserve my strength. But then again, I had just done something so extreme. My nerves were still at their peak, and I didn't think I'd be able to fall asleep right away.

I decided to calm myself by continuing to exchange messages with my friends.

It was about thirty minutes later that I finally felt sleepy and went to bed.

◆

The next day, I woke up in bed.

The sun was already up. The weather was clear and sunny, as if last night's storm had been a lie. When I looked at the clock, it was already past 9 AM.

Maybe because I was too excited last night, I seemed to have overslept a bit. Good thing today was Sunday.

…For a moment, the morning felt so normal that I almost forgot what I had done last night.

That's right. I had killed him. That man, my parents' enemy.

Everything went according to plan. The fact that the gunshot leaked out a little was unfortunate, but since there wasn't any commotion during the night, it shouldn't be a big problem.

But right after this, I realized there was one miscalculation. A miscalculation that I would regret forever.

A scream echoed through the entire house. It was Yumi's voice.

I rushed out into the hallway. It was easy to imagine whose room Yumi was in and why she was screaming.

What a terrible oversight. I had focused solely on the plan to kill him and hadn't considered who would be the first to find my uncle's body.

Now that I thought about it, it was obvious. Of the people in this house, Yumi was the most active in the morning. Naturally, Yumi had become the first to discover the body.

Sure enough, there was Yumi, collapsed in front of my uncle's bedroom.

"B-Big bro...! T-This is terrible, Uncle, Uncle is...!"

"Calm down, Yumi. It's okay, just calm down. I'm here, there's nothing to be afraid of. What happened?"

I grabbed Yumi's slender shoulders, trying to calm her down somehow. But Yumi was completely shaken, her body trembling.

"U-Uncle... he's dead! Covered in blood! Over there, over there!"

Yumi pointed inside the room. Following her lead, I looked in that direction.

Last night, I couldn't see anything because it was dark. But now it was different. Thanks to the light streaming in from the window, I could clearly see the carnage on the bed.

It was an absolute mess, no other way to describe it.

My uncle was lying in bed with his back turned, just like last night.

And because I had shot through the bedding, there was a large hole in the blanket, with feathers scattered all around.

The area around the hole in the blanket was stained dark with blood. And through that hole, I could see my uncle's back. Sure enough, the wound was stained dark with blood.

At first glance, I couldn't really tell what was what.

The wound was a complete mess.

It looked like someone had stabbed dozens, no, hundreds of awls into my uncle's back, creating holes, and then hammered them down to smash everything. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that his back had been scraped off, minced into ground meat, and then stuck back together.

…Even I couldn’t come up with a better description, probably because my brain was paralyzed by the overwhelming impact of the scene. In any case, with this much external damage, my uncle must have died instantly.

But I had shown something like this to Yumi. It would probably traumatize her for the rest of her life. I felt no guilt at all about killing my uncle, but I regretted this terribly. Seeing my sister crying endlessly, I painfully realized my lack of consideration.

For now, I pulled Yumi close to me. To hide that corpse from her view.

"Yumi, go to the living room or something. I’ll call the police."

"No, don’t leave me, big bro! Please don’t leave me alone, I’m scared. Why? Why is Uncle like that!?"

When my only sister pleaded with me through tears, I had no choice but to comply.

"Okay, okay, I get it. Don’t worry. I’ll stay with you the whole time."

"Okay… Thank you, big bro…"

It didn’t feel bad to be relied on by Yumi.

But this was a problem. Ideally, I would have gone into my uncle’s room alone first and checked to make sure I hadn’t left anything strange behind last night.

Just then,

"W-What’s going on here!?"

I turned toward the voice and saw a slightly overweight man. I recognized him. He was one of the three guests.

"My uncle is dead. Could you call the police?"

"What!? Mr. Oniyama!?"

Even though he shouldn’t have, the man peeked into my uncle’s bedroom.

"M-Mr. Oniyama!?"

Before I could stop him, he rushed into the room. He placed his hand on my uncle's neck.

“He's... He's dead! It's true!”

“You can see that! More importantly, call the police, quickly!”

“O-Okay! I'll go, I’ll call the police right away!”

Panicking, he ran towards the living room where the phone was.

Just now, that fat man touched my uncle's body. I faintly hoped that he might have left some trace that would make him look like the culprit.

第三章
投資家殺人事件

Chapter 1-3: The Investor’s Murder Case

“Nice to meet you all. My name is Inaba, and I’ll be investigating this case.”

The detective introduced himself to us as we gathered in the living room.

What a rough appearance he had. I’d often heard jokes about how detectives are indistinguishable from gangsters, and this Detective Inaba was the perfect example of that.

“And there’s one more... Hey.”

Detective Inaba called over the other young detective who was standing nearby.

“Haneda.”

The younger detective gave a brief introduction with a light bow.

This one was different from Detective Inaba; he had the look of a host. In fact, his introduction seemed rather reserved and subdued compared to his appearance. Come to think of it, there was something gloomy about his expression. Maybe something shocking had happened to him recently? Well, I didn’t really care about the detectives right now.

After that—shortly after one of the three guests called the emergency number, the police arrived. They immediately requested backup, and before long, our house was filled with guests. There were only two detectives in this living room, but in my uncle’s bedroom, which had become the crime scene, a large number of police officers were busy conducting various investigations.

The clock’s hands pointed to 9:45 AM. It hadn’t even been an hour since the call was made. What a hassle for a Sunday. Though, considering that I was the one who had caused this incident, I did feel a little guilty.

“Well then. Let’s get started—this might be an abrupt question, but could each of you introduce yourselves? It’s inconvenient to ask questions without even knowing your names. So, let’s start with... you, if you don’t mind?”

He pointed to the largest of the three guests, who appeared to be the oldest.

“Me...?”

“Yes. Could you please tell me your name?”

“Shigeki Matsui.”

“Matsui, is it? Got it. And what is your relationship with the victim... um, what was his name again?”

“Kazutoshi Oniyama,” Detective Haneda assisted.

“Ah, right. What was your relationship with Mr. Oniyama?”

“He was a major shareholder in my company. So, we had various dealings on a regular basis.”

With that, Detective Inaba continued having us introduce ourselves.

Among the remaining two guests, the tall, lanky one was Yoshiro Takeshiba, and the slightly chubby one was Kazuo Umeda.

In other words, Matsui, who left a solid impression like a pine tree (in japanese "matsu"); Takeshiba, who was lanky like bamboo (in japanese "take"); and Umeda, who was round like a plum (in japanese "ume").

...Pine, bamboo, and plum!? Who the hell gave them these names?

Moreover, both Takeshiba and Umeda were in the same position as Matsui; they were presidents of small companies whose shares were held by my uncle. What exactly was my uncle’s network like?

After finding out about the three men's identities, Detective Inaba turned his sharp gaze towards us.

Yumi, who was sitting next to me, huddled closer, looking frightened.

“You two... are you siblings?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

I took the initiative to respond, playing the role of the protective older brother.

“You’re the victim’s children?”

“No, we’re his nephew and niece. Our parents passed away three years ago. Our uncle took us in as orphans.”

“I see. My condolences.”

Detective Inaba lightly bowed his head. However, his tone didn’t sound sympathetic at all.

After asking for our names, Detective Inaba looked around at the six people present.

“Well then, let’s get started. I’d like to hear various things from you. First of all, the victim is indeed Mr. Kazutoshi Oniyama, correct?”

No one voiced any objections.

“Very well. Now, who was the first to discover the victim?”

“I... did.”

Yumi timidly raised her hand.

“Ah, that must have been quite a shock. I hate to ask this, but could you tell me what time you found the body?”

I felt a flash of anger. I knew it was his job to ask questions, but she was just a middle school girl. Couldn’t he be a bit more gentle with his tone?

“She found the body around nine o’clock.”

I answered in a slightly rough tone. Detective Inaba’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“I wasn’t asking you.”

“Oh, sorry about that. But Yumi, it was around that time, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

Detective Inaba shrugged his shoulders in exasperation.

“All right, then. Could you tell me how you came across the body?”

“You went to wake him up because it was strange that he hadn’t gotten up by nine, right?”

Yumi nodded in agreement with my words. Detective Inaba shrugged again.

“Haa. Seiichi Amagi... was it? I understand that you don’t want to make your sister recall the details of the body, but I’d appreciate it if you could be a bit more cooperative.”

“I fully intend to. If you have any questions, I’ll answer them—just ask me. My sister went to my uncle’s room at nine in the morning, found the body, and screamed. Everyone gathered after hearing the scream. That’s all.”

Detective Inaba stared at me. No, it was more accurate to say he glared at me. But I didn't back down and glared right back. After all, this was the crime I committed, and I couldn't let Yumi bear any more of the burden.

It felt like the air around us grew tense. But perhaps because I didn't back down an inch, Detective Inaba finally sighed and averted his gaze.

"All right, we'll leave it at that for now. So, everyone gathered after hearing the girl's scream, correct?"

"Yes, that's right. I was the first to rush over."

"I see. Could you tell me a bit more about what happened then?"

"There's not much to tell. I heard the scream, rushed over, and found Yumi terrified in front of my uncle's room. While I was trying to calm her down... Mr. Umeda, I believe? He came over, so I asked him to call the police."

I pointed to Umeda, the slightly chubby one among the three guests.

Detective Inaba turned to Umeda.

"Is that correct?"

"Y-Yes."

"I see. So, no one entered the room before we arrived?"

"Well, I... did enter for a moment," Umeda timidly raised his hand. "I just wanted to confirm that Mr. Oniyama was really dead."

"I see. Did you touch anything?"

"I touched his neck to check for a pulse."

"You didn't touch anything else?"

"No."

"All right, that's fine. By the way, it's not certain yet, but it seems likely that the victim was killed with a shotgun. There was also a shotgun found in the room where the incident occurred."

There was a gun in my uncle's bedroom? I hadn't noticed that. It was probably the over-and-under shotgun that wasn't stored in the gun locker.

“So, I’d like to ask, does anyone have any connection to a shotgun?”

The three men—Pine, Bamboo, and Plum—suddenly started looking nervous.

After exchanging glances, Matsui finally spoke up as if resigning himself to the situation.

“Well, we... do some clay shooting as a hobby.”

“Is that so? Does ‘we’ include the victim?”

“Yes.”

“So, each of you, including the victim, owned your own shotguns?”

“Yes, well...”

“Could it be that you still have your guns with you?”

“Well... we were going to do some clay shooting today and yesterday.”

“I see, so you do have them with you.”

It seemed like Detective Inaba’s eyes gleamed.

I smirked. Just as planned, suspicion had fallen on the three of them.

“Don't worry, we're not going to arrest you just for having a gun. But... I do have one request. If you wouldn’t mind, could you hand over the shotguns that you all own? We don’t have a warrant yet, so we can’t force you to comply, but if you’d be willing to voluntarily submit them, we would really appreciate it.”

Although the three—Matsui, Takeshiba, and Umeda—were reluctant, they agreed. In this situation, they really didn’t have much choice.

“Thank you for your cooperation. Also, Mr. Amagi, we'd like to inspect the gun your uncle owned as well. Would that be alright?”

“If it belonged to my uncle, you're free to do whatever you need with it.”

This was a question I had anticipated. I immediately agreed.

“Thank you. Now, let’s get back to the questioning. First, I’d like to ask if anyone heard what sounded like a gunshot last night?”

If the victim was shot, the sound of the gunfire would have been heard. It was a natural question for the police to ask.

“Now that you mention it—”

It was Matsui who spoke up.

“Last night, I do recall hearing something that sounded like a gunshot.”

(What!?)

My heart tightened in my chest.

I remembered the gunshot being louder than I had expected last night, and anxiety started to rise within me.

In reality, the timing of the gunshot didn’t quite match up with the sound of the thunder. I thought I had managed to camouflage it somewhat, but it wouldn’t be strange if someone had heard the gunshot.

“Mr. Matsui, do you remember what time that was?”

“Well... hm, what time was it? I was drinking, and it was right before I went to bed, so I can’t say for certain. But I think... it was just after midnight.”

My heartbeat sped up. Just after midnight? Last night, I left my room to kill my uncle around 12:30 AM. Considering the margin of error due to his intoxication, it's not entirely wrong to say it was just after midnight. No, calm down. Hearing the gunshot last night would have been problematic if someone had noticed the sound and seen me. However, now that everything is done, even if someone claims they heard the gunshot, it doesn’t necessarily prove I’m the culprit. It’s fine, there’s no problem.

“There was quite a bit of thunder last night. Are you sure you didn’t mistake it for that?”

“No way, Detective. The sound of a shotgun is a pretty sharp bang. There’s no way I could mistake it for thunder. But at the time, I thought maybe something had shorted out after a lightning strike.”

“But you’re saying now that it might have been a gunshot?”

“Yes. Considering Mr. Oniyama ended up like that, in hindsight, I’m convinced it was the distinct sound of a shotgun.”

“I see. Can you recall the time of the gunshot any more precisely? It’s important to get these details right so that we don’t leave any room for a sly defense attorney to poke holes in this later.”

“Well, the exact time... Last night, Mr. Oniyama, the three of us, and I were drinking together. Until what time was it again?”

Matsui turned to Takeshiba and Umeda.

“Ah, it was just after 11:30, I think,” Umeda replied.

“...That’s right, Detective. After that, I went to the bathroom and then went to bed. It was a little while later that I thought I heard the gunshot.”

“So, it was indeed just after midnight. What about you, Mr. Takeshiba and Mr. Umeda?”

“I don’t remember hearing any gunshot,” Umeda said. “My room was a bit further from Mr. Oniyama’s bedroom. What about you, Mr. Takeshiba? Your room was next to Mr. Matsui’s, wasn’t it?”

“Well... um... I don’t think I heard anything like that,” Takeshiba responded, sounding slightly troubled. “I couldn’t sleep, so I was awake pretty late, but I don’t recall hearing any gunshot. Mr. Matsui, could you have mistaken it for the sound of thunder?”

“What? Mr. Takeshiba, you didn’t hear anything either? That’s impossible. You’re familiar with the sound of a shotgun, aren’t you? There’s no way you could mistake that sharp bang for thunder. I’m sure I heard a gunshot last night.”

Matsui responded somewhat defensively.

“Really? Then maybe I just missed it. I thought I was awake until late, but I was dozing off.”

“Is that so...”

Detective Inaba seemed disheartened, realizing that the testimonies from the three weren’t very reliable.

It worked out well for me. I was shocked when Matsui mentioned hearing the gunshot, but it seems choosing that time was the right decision after all.

“Mr. Amagi, what about you? And your sister?”

Detective Inaba turned to us.

Okay, time to mislead them.

“No, I was up until about one o’clock last night, but I don’t remember hearing any gunshots. Yumi, isn’t that right?”

Yumi responded hesitantly,

“I fell asleep much earlier, so...”

“I see. So, everyone was in their rooms after midnight?”

Everyone nodded.

In other words, no one could prove their alibi. This too was something I had anticipated.

Next, Detective Inaba requested to take everyone’s fingerprints. He emphasized that it was voluntary, but in a situation like this, there was no way to refuse, so in the end, all of us had our fingerprints taken.

It was a rather unusual experience to have my finger grabbed by the detective’s rough hand and pressed onto a sheet of paper with a note that said “This fingerprint will be destroyed after the investigation.”

“Thank you for your cooperation. For now, Mr. Amagi, your sister can go back to her room.”

“Thank you.”

I immediately took Yumi with me and tried to leave the room quickly.

However, Detective Inaba called out to me again as I turned away.

“Ah, I’m sorry, but after you take your sister back, could you return here? I still have some questions for everyone.”

My heart pounded hard again. Why me?

No, calm down. He probably just wants to ask about my uncle’s relationships. Besides, I'm not the only one he wants to question; the three—Matsui, Takeshiba, and Umeda—are also involved. He’s not necessarily suspecting me.

“...Alright. I’ll be back as soon as I’ve taken Yumi to her room.”

◆

I took Yumi to her room and laid her down on her bed.

“Thank you, big bro. I’m sorry, even though it’s your birthday today... I ended up like this...”

With those words, I remembered that today was the day I officially became an adult.

“Don’t worry about it. Birthdays don’t matter, and you have nothing to feel guilty about. After seeing something like that, it’s understandable. Just rest for now, okay?”

“Okay...”

Yumi closed her eyes. But soon, tears began to well up on her face.

“Why... Why did this have to happen...? First Dad and Mom, then Grandma, and now Uncle too...”

I couldn’t find the words to comfort her. I hadn’t realized she was so troubled.

Well, it’s true that after losing Dad, Mom, Grandma, and now Uncle, one might start to feel like it's fate. But Dad and Mom were killed by Uncle, Grandma died of old age, and I was the one who killed Uncle. There’s no room for fate or God in this. Yumi had nothing to worry about. I knew that for certain.

I wished I could tell Yumi the truth and ease her mind. But I couldn’t do that.

“Hey, big bro... you’re not going to leave me, are you?”

Probably because I had remained silent, Yumi, overcome with anxiety, asked me that.

"...Of course not. What a stupid thing to say."

"Yeah. Sorry, that was a weird thing to ask.

Big bro, you're being called by the detective, right? I'm okay now, so you should go."

"Alright. I'll come back later."

I patted Yumi on the head before leaving the room.

I never would have imagined at that moment that Yumi's fears would come true.

◆

On my way back to the living room, I passed several police officers in the hallway.

The house was now completely swarming with police.

Given the situation, I started to worry about the shell casing I had hidden in my room. If the police were to find something like that, I wouldn't get off lightly. But with officers wandering around everywhere, I couldn't afford to make any reckless moves. I'd have to find the right moment to discreetly get rid of it.

For now, my top priority was to avoid getting cornered by Detective Inaba.

I took a deep breath, mentally preparing responses to the questions I anticipated, and returned to the living room.

As soon as he saw me, Detective Inaba called out.

"Is your sister feeling better?"

"Yes, thanks to you."

"That's good to hear. Now that all four of you are here, there's just one thing I'd like to ask you all—"

Detective Inaba cast a sharp glance at the four of us—me, Matsui, Takeshiba, and Umeda. What could he want to ask just the four of us, excluding Yumi?

"From everything I've heard, it seems that you and Mr. Oniyama were all quite close, isn't that right?"

No one objected.

"If that's the case... something just doesn't sit right with me.

Mr. Oniyama was murdered in such a brutal way. So why is it that the only one grieving is that young girl?"

It was unexpected.

A sudden and yet entirely reasonable question. Why weren't we mourning if uncle had been killed? Detective Inaba's doubt was understandable—too understandable, in fact, that I couldn't think of anything to say in response. Despite his expressionless face, the detective had struck right at the core.

But it wasn't just me who was at a loss for words. The other three were just as stiff and silent as I was.

"W-We're crying on the inside."

After a brief silence, Takeshiba finally managed to give that answer.

However, such a forced response was unlikely to satisfy Detective Inaba.

"Mr. Takeshiba, there was quite a pause before you answered. Is there any particular reason for that?"

"N-No, there's no deep meaning behind it."

"W-Wait a minute, Detective."

At that moment, Umeda interrupted with a high-pitched voice.

"Judging from your questions, you're not suggesting that one of us is the culprit, are you?"

Detective Inaba remained calm and composed.

"No, that's exactly what I'm suggesting. There was no sign of a struggle in the victim's room. And so far, we haven't found any evidence that someone broke into this house. Given the circumstances, isn't it reasonable to assume that the person who killed Mr. Oniyama was someone who was in this house last night? And there's more—except for Mr. Amagi, all of you still have shotguns in your rooms, don't you? Add to that the fact that none of you have alibis, and I'm afraid I can't help but say that the evidence supporting your innocence is rather weak."

"Wait a minute," I interjected. "If that's the case, then I have nothing to do with this, right? I've never owned a shotgun. I didn't even know my uncle did clay shooting."

"There were at least four guns in this house last night. It's possible that you borrowed one of them and fired it."

"Well, that's true, but..."

I found myself at a loss for words once again. After all, he was right.

"You still don't seem satisfied... but please bear with me. We, the police, need to consider every possibility. It's a difficult thing to say, but given that you were in the house last night, we can't completely rule out the possibility that your sister might be a suspect as well."

"W-Wait a minute! She's just a child! There's no way she could kill someone with a shotgun!"

"In America, there are plenty of cases where minors have killed people with shotguns. But please, don't get too worked up. As I said earlier, I'm just talking about possibilities. It's the job of the police to be suspicious of people, so we have to verify every possibility. It's just how it is."

Perhaps I had underestimated them.

Not mourning my uncle's death—that alone had drawn suspicion, and now even Yumi was being treated as a suspect.

Maybe I should have put more effort into creating an alibi.

"Well, thank you all for your cooperation. That will be all for now. I'd appreciate it if those of you who own guns could hand them over as soon as possible.

Also, it would help if you could all stay in your rooms for the time being. Not that we have any reason to detain you at this point. But if you could stay where we can easily reach you for questioning, it would really help speed up the investigation."

◆

I decided to check on Yumi in her room.

Even though it was still morning, she must have been mentally exhausted. She was sleeping soundly, breathing softly. There wasn't much I could do for her by staying by her side, and I might wake her up. So I reluctantly decided to return to my own room.

It was clear that my room hadn't been searched while I was gone. I really wanted to do something about that shell casing while I had the chance—

Detective Inaba definitely suspected that one of us was the culprit. And he was right.

If I were in Detective Inaba's shoes, I'd be thinking the same thing. The killer must be one of the people living in this house, but for now, we can't restrict their movements. Instead, we've advised them to refrain from going out as much as possible.

So, if someone tried to leave the house in this situation, they'd immediately be suspected. They might even be followed.

In the end, I could only spend the time uneasily, knowing that I couldn't dispose of the shell casing.

What's more, as long as they don't search this room, the police won't have any grounds to arrest me. On the other hand, for them to search my room, they'd need evidence that points to me as the culprit. For now, the best I can do is lie low and avoid any suspicious behavior—

...Or so I thought.

As the clock struck noon, and as my stomach began to growl, there was a knock at the door.

Thinking that Yumi had woken up, I opened the door to find—

"Excuse me, but could we have a word?"

My heart sank. It was Detective Haneda. And he had brought along someone who looked like a forensics expert.

"If I told you I'm busy right now, I suppose that wouldn't do me any good, would it?"

"Well, it would really help if you could cooperate."

"Alright, what is it?"

"Actually, we collected some hair samples from the crime scene, and we'd like to compare them. Could we take a DNA sample from you, Mr. Amagi?"

So that's what this was about.

Hair. It wasn't a big deal. I lived in this house, so it wouldn't be strange for my hair to be found anywhere.

"Sure. What do I need to do?"

"Could you open your mouth? This will only take a moment."

The forensics expert standing beside him held out a cotton swab.

When I opened my mouth, the expert gently swabbed the inside of my right cheek. It felt a bit ticklish, but it was over quickly.

"Thank you for your cooperation."

“Are you planning to do the same with Yumi?”

“Yes, if possible.”

“She’s sleeping right now. Could you do it later?”

“Oh, is that so? Very well, we’ll try not to wake her.”

It was a rather indifferent response.

I wasn’t happy about it, but I had no choice but to compromise.

After that, nothing happened for a while.

By noon, Yumi had woken up and came to see me. Together, we ate the soba noodles that the chubby Umeda had considerately ordered for us. As expected, Umeda seemed to be quite particular about food, just as his appearance suggested. However, I didn't feel like facing anyone, so we ate in my room.

After lunch, Yumi returned to her room. She said she had some school assignments to do. I thought there was no need for her to worry about homework in a situation like this, but if it helped her take her mind off things, then it was probably for the best.

With nothing much to do, I killed time by exchanging idle emails.

Another knock came at the door around three in the afternoon.

Feeling a bit irritated, expecting it to be that detective again, I opened the door to find one of the guests, the tall lanky one, standing there.

“Oh, Mr. Takeshiba… right? What is it?”

“Sorry to bother you. That detective has started another round of questioning. This time, he’s calling us in one by one, and you’re next, so I came to get you.”

Detectives really are persistent. How much time do they need to waste before they’re satisfied?

“I see. Alright, I’ll be right there.”

I quickly left my room and headed for the living room.

There, as expected, were the detective duo of Inaba and Haneda waiting for me.

“Oh, Mr. Amagi. I’m sorry, but there are a few more things we’d like to ask you.”

They spoke with a calm demeanor, completely indifferent to the inconvenience they were causing me. I sighed and said,

“Fine, just get it over with quickly, please.”

“Thank you, we’ll be quick… So, you were in your room around midnight last night, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“What were you doing?”

“What do you think? I was trying to sleep, of course.”

“But didn’t you say that you were awake until around 1 AM? So, you couldn’t fall asleep for about an hour?”

Damn it. That’s right, I did say that.

“…I couldn’t fall asleep right away, so I was texting a friend until I got sleepy. If you don’t believe me, you can check.”

“No, no, we’re not doubting you. But you were texting for about an hour?”

“Yes. Is that strange?”

“No, I understand. As you can see, I’m an old-fashioned person who only uses a cellphone for calls, but Haneda here is always texting whenever he has a spare moment.”

Detective Inaba glared at Haneda, but Haneda just shrugged, as if used to it.

“Alright, let’s move on. About the victim, Mr. Kazutoshi Oniyama… He was your guardian, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“This might be a strange question, but did you get along with him?”

“…What do you mean by that? From the way this conversation is going, it feels like you’re treating me as a suspect.”

“No, no, nothing like that. And if my attitude seemed rude, I apologize. It might sound like an excuse, but this is how I am with everyone I talk to. And let me also say this: I do consider you a suspect. However, compared to the other three, I’m not as suspicious of you and your sister. Given the circumstances, the culprit is likely someone familiar with handling shotguns.”

For some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to fully trust what this detective was saying.

“Actually, Mr. Amagi, I’d like to ask you something. Do you have something against us, the police? Ever since we met today, I’ve felt that you’ve been overly wary of us.”

“Well… isn’t that only natural in a situation like this? I wake up in the morning to find my uncle dead, the police suddenly show up, and now I’m being treated as a suspect. And on top of that, the person who killed my uncle might be nearby. Isn’t it normal to be on edge in a situation like this?”

“I see, that’s a perfectly reasonable opinion. Indeed, you have a sister to protect as well.”

He stared at me with sharp eyes.

I was the one who had killed my uncle. Maybe it was because of that guilt, but I couldn’t stay calm when faced with such a piercing gaze.

“Can I continue with my questions?”

“…Go ahead.”

“Do you know of anyone who might have held a grudge against Mr. Oniyama?”

“Well, I’m not sure. My uncle was rarely home. But, well, I often heard him badmouthing people, so I’m sure if you looked, you could find plenty of people who had a grudge against him.”

“Oh, my. That’s quite a harsh assessment, considering he was your uncle and also your guardian.”

Once again, I found myself at a loss for words.

“…Not all guardians are necessarily good ones, you know.”

“So, are you saying Mr. Oniyama wasn’t a very caring guardian?”

And just like that, he caught me out.

What a mess—I’m really such a pathetic person. Shouldn’t I be saying through tears that my uncle was a good man? By saying this, it’s like admitting I had a motive.

I couldn't believe how foolish I was, digging myself into a hole just because the detective hit a nerve.

"…My uncle was, at best, a laissez-faire type. He gave us living expenses, then went out every day to do whatever he wanted. But as for what he was doing or who he was with, I have no idea."

I felt an overwhelming urge to just spill everything right here. To tell him that the man had killed my parents. To tell him what that man had done in that changing room, something I didn't even want to remember.

"I see. That was very helpful. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Is that all? Can I go back now?"

"Well, actually… I'm sorry to say this, but…"

"…Is there something else?"

Detectives really are persistent. Just how many questions do they need to ask before they're satisfied? I was starting to get a bit defensive.

But Detective Inaba remained as calm and composed as ever.

"We've conducted a thorough investigation, and I'm thinking of heading back to the station."

"I see. And what does that have to do with me?"

"We'd like you to come with us."

For a moment, I forgot to breathe.

"…What do you mean? Why do I need to go to the police station?"

"You might already know this, but important witnesses are asked to come to the station for a detailed interview."

Wait. Hold on a second.

"Can you stop beating around the bush? What do you mean by 'important witness'?"

"Do I really need to spell it out? It means that you're under serious suspicion."

I felt my pulse quicken. I couldn't keep up with the barrage of unexpected words.

I struggled to stay calm as I tried to make sense of what Detective Inaba was saying.

An important witness? I'm under serious suspicion? Hold on, what does that mean?

Why me? I shouldn't have left any evidence at the scene. The only piece of evidence is still hidden in a book in my room. They shouldn't be able to pin this on me.

Or did I say something during the questioning that gave me away as the culprit? No, that can't be it. The only things I talked about were my alibi for last night and my uncle's relationships.

So why, why am I now under "serious suspicion"?

Detective Haneda took a step closer to me.

"Will you come with us?"

"Y-you've got to be kidding me!"

I shouted without thinking.

"Why do I have to go to the police station? You say I'm under suspicion? Then show me the evidence! If you can't, I'm not going anywhere with you!"

"Now, now, calm down, Mr. Amagi."

Just like Detective Inaba, Detective Haneda didn't show any emotion.

"If you're innocent, then that's perfectly fine. There's no need to get so worked up and angry about it. If you come to the station, you can assert your innocence as much as you want.

However, the fact is that you are under serious suspicion at this point. Of course, I'm not saying this without a basis; we do have evidence. But since your sister is in this house, it's not really appropriate to discuss it here, is it? That's why we'd like you to come to the station. Don't worry, just coming to the station won't give you a criminal record or anything. If you're truly innocent, you won't have any problem talking about it at the station, right?"

With skillful words, he blocked off any escape route I might have had.

How did it come to this? Was the plan I made really that sloppy?

◆

It was a small room.

There were two desks, one large and one small, and two chairs placed opposite each other at the large desk. I was seated in one of the chairs, facing Detective Inaba.

It was just like the interrogation room I'd seen on TV. I never imagined I would actually find myself in a place like this.

"Do you know what a gun locker is?"

That was the first thing Detective Inaba said.

"…It's a locker for storing guns, right?"

"That's right. When you own a gun, you're required by law to keep it in a gun locker. There was one in the victim, Mr. Oniyama's room as well. Were you aware of that?"

How should I answer? Should I pretend I didn't know? No, it would be unnatural to say I didn't notice the locker when I lived in the same house.

"I knew there was a locker in my uncle's study. I didn't know he kept guns in it, though."

"I see. Well then, last night, we found out that there were at least five shotguns in this house. Mr. Matsui, Mr. Takeshiba, and Mr. Umeda each had a gun, and the victim, Mr. Oniyama, had two. That makes five in total.

And one of the guns that Mr. Oniyama owned was found in his bedroom. Perhaps he was in the middle of cleaning it. But the other gun was found stored in that gun locker. The locker was locked, but the key was in a place where it could be found fairly easily. In other words, it's possible that the crime was committed using the gun that was stored in that gun locker. Well, at this point, it's just a possibility."

Damn it. I should have hidden the key in a more obscure place after the deed was done. But it's too late for regrets now.

"…And what does that have to do with me?"

"Well, just listen. So, I tried to imagine myself as the culprit and attempted to open the gun locker and take out the gun. But the locker was placed in a pretty dark corner of the room.

On top of that, there's a small shelf inside the locker. I didn't notice it when I tried to take out the gun, and I ended up banging my head on it."

"…"

Why do I suddenly feel a chill?

“And then, something came to mind. Did you know that human hair naturally sheds… uh, how many strands was it? Well, anyway, about fifty strands fall out each day. And those fallen hairs typically land on the floor, given the right conditions. So, I had forensics check inside the locker to see if there were any hairs.

I think you’re starting to understand by now, Mr. Amagi. We found it—your hair.”

…My face must be frozen solid right now.

I knew I should have kept a calm demeanor, but neither my face nor my body would move.

“Mr. Amagi, earlier you said this: you knew there was a locker, but you didn’t know it had a gun inside. But that’s strange, isn’t it? Because your hair was found inside that gun locker. You must have known what was inside.”

“…I-I don’t know anything about that. I didn’t even know about the locker. Maybe my hair got in there through some gap in the locker or something. Besides, you don’t even know when the hair got in there, right?”

“Well, about that. Apparently, when hair falls out, it undergoes certain changes over time. I’m not too familiar with the technical details, but I’ve heard that after it falls out, the root dries out and other changes occur. The forensic team told me that the hair found in the locker had fallen out within the last twenty-four hours.”

…This is bad.

I underestimated them. I never imagined things would start unraveling from something like this. No wonder the police suspect me.

But I can’t back down now. Going to prison for killing someone who deserved to die would be utterly ridiculous.

“There could be plenty of explanations, like my hair got on my uncle’s body and then fell off. There are lots of ways to explain that.”

“Yes, that’s a valid point. But no matter how many excuses you come up with, it won’t clear you of suspicion. And there’s one more thing I’d like to ask. Mr. Amagi, you have a cellphone, don’t you?”

“…I do, but what about it?”

“You mentioned that you were texting until 1 AM last night, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, I’m sorry to say this, but we requested the phone company to show us your text message logs. And we found something strange. It turns out you did send and receive a lot of text messages between midnight and 1 AM last night.”

“And what’s the problem with that?”

“About those texts… there was a specific period when you didn’t send or receive any messages at all. Between 12:30 AM and 12:45 AM last night, you didn’t exchange a single message. What were you doing during that time?”

“T-That… I just went to the bathroom for a bit.”

“Oh, to the bathroom? Well, you could still text while in the bathroom, couldn’t you?”

“What I do in the bathroom is my business! And just because I wasn’t texting doesn’t mean anything!”

“Well, about that…

The results of the autopsy have come out, and it turns out the victim died between midnight and 1 AM last night.

Also, do you remember what Mr. Matsui said? That he heard a shotgun blast just after midnight?”

“…I remember. But Mr. Takeshiba, who was sleeping in the next room, said he didn’t hear anything. That testimony isn’t reliable.”

“Well, about that. After talking to him more, Mr. Takeshiba remembered. He said he did hear a gunshot, and he’s certain of it. He also testified that it was around 12:30 AM. In other words, it matches the time when you weren’t in your room. Mr. Amagi, I’ll ask you one more time—where were you, and what were you doing during that time?”

“T-That…”

As I struggled to come up with an answer, Detective Haneda suddenly entered the room.

“Inspector. We’ve got the warrant.”

He was holding a piece of paper in his hand. Detective Inaba took it, and without the slightest change in expression, turned back to me.

“Well, I think you now understand that you’re under some suspicion. So, we’d like to search your room and belongings. You know, a house search.”

The blood drained from my face. This was the situation I feared most.

“Y-You’ve got to be joking. I’m not going to let you ransack my room for something like this! I refuse!”

“Well, we figured you might say that.”

Detective Inaba showed me the document that had just been handed to him.

“The warrant was just approved. Do you know what this is? It’s a search warrant. The decision has already been made to search your room.”

…Oh, I see. So that’s how it is.

There’s no way a search warrant could be issued in just five minutes. In other words, the police had been suspecting me from the beginning. I didn’t need to bother with that clumsy excuse.

What a so-called perfect crime. In the end, it turns out that it was impossible for a young guy in his early twenties to outsmart the police.

◆

And in less than an hour,

Detective Inaba, unusually, came into the interrogation room again, wearing a triumphant expression.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Amagi. We found it—the shell casing. And it’s got blood on it, found in your room.”

“…I see.”

There’s no way they could’ve found the shell casing hidden in that place—

The faint hope I had left was shattered. The blood was probably my uncle’s. It must have gotten on there when I tried to confirm his death last night.

“I don’t know the details myself, but it seems that with a shell casing, they can somewhat determine which gun was used to fire it. I suspect it’s the gun that was in the gun locker along

with your hair. We've sent it off for analysis along with the bloodstains, so now we just have to wait for the results… but it would be helpful if you could confess before those results come in."

I let out a sigh.

So they can determine which gun was used even with a shotgun. All those hours I spent researching rifling marks and gunpowder residue seem like a waste now.

"Mr. Amagi, I don't want to speak ill of the dead, but we've looked into the man who was killed, Mr. Oniyama. Well, it's only been half a day, so we didn't dig too deep, but we checked things like his taxes.

To put it simply, he was a greedy man. He made a killing in real estate during the bubble economy, but after the recession, he lost most of his assets and was in a pretty tight spot. But a few years ago, he somehow managed to procure funds and made some successful investments, which brings us to where we are now.

Recently, he's been buying up large amounts of stock in small and medium-sized companies with growth potential… which is fine, but then he would force those companies to change their suppliers and clients, acting quite high-handedly. It seems he was also known for his rough behavior… not exactly a model guardian, I'd say.

But that's not all. We also checked Mr. Oniyama's computer. Do you know what we found?"

"…No. What did you find?"

"Pornographic images. Well, nowadays that might not be so uncommon, but the problem is that the images clearly showed girls under eighteen."

"..."

Remembering the bizarre behavior in the dressing room, I wasn't surprised by something like that.

"Oh, you don't seem too shocked. Just as I thought.

Mr. Amagi, you knew about this, didn't you? That's why you're not surprised, isn't it?

And you have a younger sister who's still in middle school, right? A cute little sister. I can imagine what you might have done to protect her, Mr. Amagi."

Japanese police are competent—at least, that's what I used to hear. I thought that was a thing of the past, but apparently, it's not. Just half a day. And they've already uncovered all this.

Detective Inaba continued.

“Listen, Mr. Amagi. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that we already have enough evidence. We’ve also figured out your motive. Even if you keep denying it, it won’t be difficult to obtain an arrest warrant. And once that happens, you’ll be going to jail whether you stay silent or not.

In Japanese courts, if you have a clear motive, admit to your crime, and show some remorse, your sentence can be somewhat lighter. But if there’s sufficient evidence and you still stubbornly deny it, your sentence can be even harsher. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He’s good at this. My resolve is already starting to waver. This must be what it means to be backed into a corner.

There’s none of the yelling or threats I expected, just a calm, sympathetic demeanor.

It’s such a persuasive argument that I couldn’t help but let out a sigh of admiration. Thanks to that, I no longer felt like denying it any further.

“…Detective, I’d like to talk about a hypothetical situation.”

“Go ahead. Yes, let’s treat it as a hypothetical. I won’t record anything you say from this point on. Hey.”

Detective Inaba glanced at Detective Haneda, who had been taking notes at a small desk in the corner of the room. Detective Haneda obediently put down his pen.

“Please, go ahead.”

“If that man had the kind of fetish you’re talking about, and if I knew about it, and if I killed him to protect my sister,

But if I were to say that I killed my uncle because of his fetish, how do you think the public would react? They might condemn my uncle as a pervert. That would be fine, but then wouldn’t my sister, who lived with him for several years, be seen in a strange light by society?”

“I see. You’re absolutely right. That would be tough for a middle school girl. We police aren’t heartless; we’d want to avoid that. But in a murder case, we have to prove the motive.”

“So if I were the one who killed my uncle, but I had another motive, what then? For example, what if the funds my uncle procured a few years ago were actually my parents’ inheritance, and I knew that my uncle was the one who killed my parents? Wouldn’t that be enough of a motive to kill someone?”

Even Detective Inaba was visibly surprised at this point.

“…I see. That would indeed be more than enough motive.

I think I understand what you’re trying to say. Very well, if you had a different motive for killing the victim, I promise that we won’t make any public statements that would harm that young girl.

But—there’s a condition. You’ll have to confess everything.”

In Detective Inaba’s mind, it seems he’s already decided that I’m the culprit. It’s a little frustrating, but I don’t feel like arguing anymore.

Even someone like me, who failed miserably at committing the perfect crime, knows that there’s no way out now. At this point, the only thing I can do is confess everything and expose my uncle’s crimes to the world.

“Alright. I admit it. I’m the one who shot my uncle, Kazutoshi Oniyama, with a shotgun.”

I began to tell everything.

I’ve seen dramas where the criminal confesses while crying, but that wasn’t the case for me.

The emotion that welled up inside me was something that should be called anger. Now I’m branded as a murderer and headed for prison. All because of that man. If only he hadn’t existed. If only he hadn’t killed my parents. If only he hadn’t become my guardian. If only he hadn’t existed!

Anger drove me to speak. I told them everything. How I hired a private investigator to reinvestigate my parents’ deaths. How I found out that my uncle had purchased a sleeping pill called melatonin. And how my father, who had never even had a single accident, let alone a drowsy driving incident, died in a car crash on his way back from visiting my uncle.

By the time I finished telling everything, my breathing was so erratic from excitement that it was hard to control. Yet, strangely, I felt a peculiar sense of accomplishment.

At the very least, my sister would never have to suffer at the hands of that man again. The police might even reinvestigate my parents’ deaths.

The only thing that weighed on my mind was that I had made my sister the sibling of a murderer.

“…Is that everything?”

“Yes, that’s all.”

“Very well. We’ll record your confession as a statement. Later, we’ll need you to confirm it with your signature.”

“As long as it doesn’t cause any trouble for my sister, I’ll be happy to sign whatever you need.”

“Yes, we understand.”

Later, when the statement was completed, it indeed didn’t mention anything about my uncle’s fetishes.

“We’ll now request an arrest warrant and proceed with your arrest.”

“Feel free. I have no intention of running or hiding at this point.”

“That’s a relief. By the way, you’re aware that you have the right to an attorney, correct?”

“…I know, but I don’t have any lawyer acquaintances.”

“I see. In that case—”

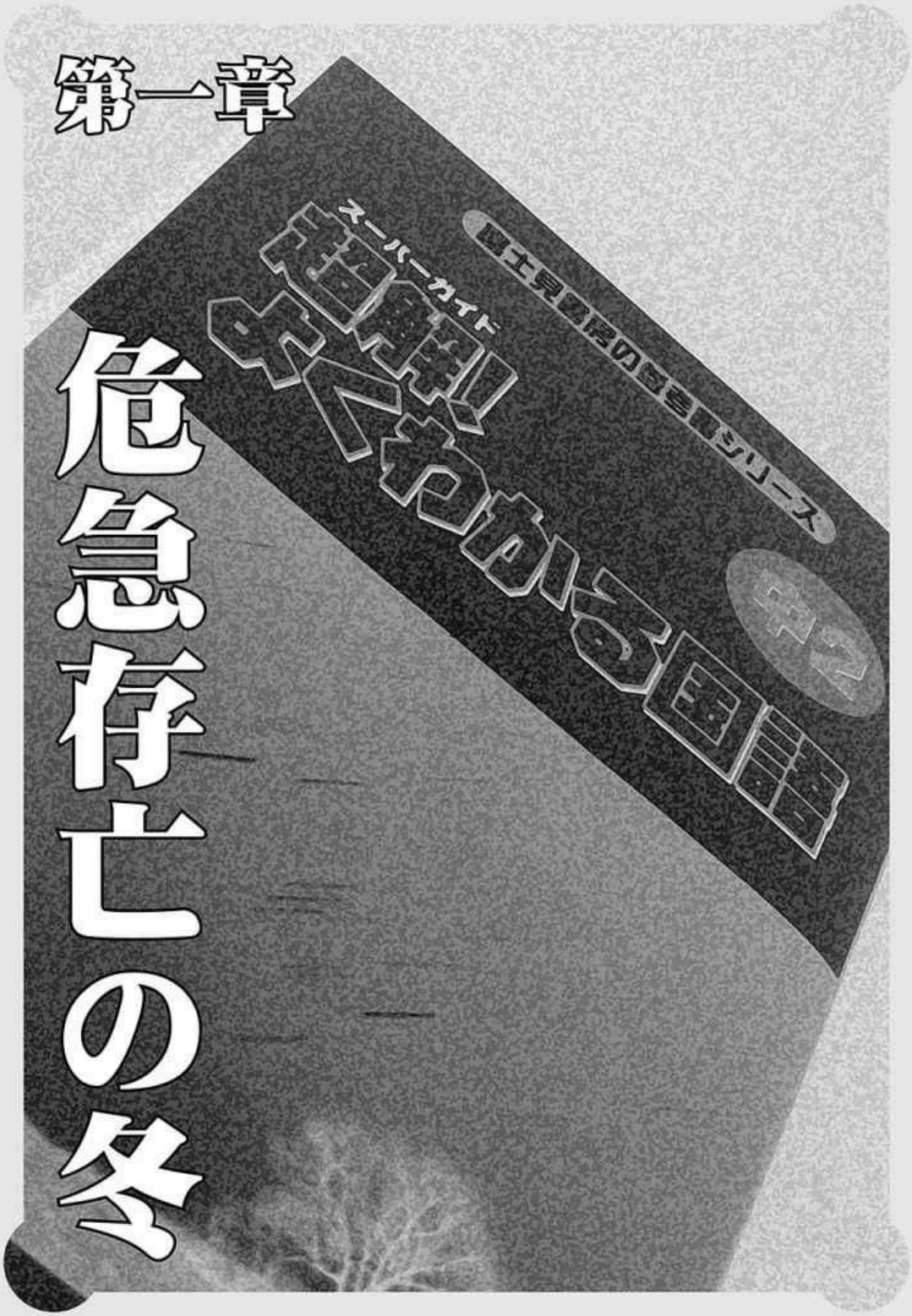
Little did I know that Detective Inaba’s next words would change the course of my life.

“—You’ll be assigned a public defender.”

第二部

国選弁護人の憂鬱

Tactical Judgment


第一章
危急存亡の冬
スーパーガイド
超訳ネットの国語
現代文の読み方シリーズ
第2巻

Part 2: The Court-Appointed Defense Attorney's Gloom

Chapter 2-1: Winter of Crisis

December 17th, 12:00 PM, Detention Center

"…Is that the whole truth?"

"Yes."

Amagi nodded firmly.

"Well, this is quite the mess."

When I finished hearing all the circumstances, my face must have stiffened awkwardly, as if it had been coated in plaster.

I never thought it would be this decisive. This time, it seems my time has come to pay the piper. Just as some bespectacled critic predicted, my record of acquittals might end here.

Shooting a sleeping person to death, then going out of your way to confirm the person was dead, and on top of that, confessing to it with corroborating evidence—there's no way to argue against that.

There's a famous saying among lawyers:

"When the facts are against you, argue the law. When the law is against you, argue the facts. When both are against you—pound the table."

In this case, the facts are overwhelmingly against us. That means I can only argue on legal grounds… but a claim of self-defense definitely won't fly. Given how premeditated this was, trying to argue that it was a crime of passion and that the defendant now regrets it won't convince anyone. Even the possibility of avoiding a prison sentence is slim. This is beyond the scope of defense.

If only the crime had been committed a month earlier. Why on earth would anyone commit murder on their twentieth birthday? If it had been a crime committed by a minor, public opinion and the way people would treat the case might have been different.

At this point, the only option is to argue that the police investigation or the prosecutor's evidence-gathering involved some illegal methods. In other words, to muddy the waters in court.

But even the most incompetent prosecutor should have enough sense to anticipate that I, as the defense attorney, will try to exploit any investigative flaws. It's not something to brag about, but I have a history, so they won't let things go my way easily.

There's only one thing that stood out after listening to Amagi's story: the strange deal with Detective Inaba to keep quiet about Kazutoshi Oniyama's sexual proclivities.

I've never heard of the police offering to keep quiet about a motive. If I bring this up in court, I might be able to turn the prosecutor's face pale.

However, if I do that, I'll betray Amagi, who was willing to kill Oniyama to protect his sister. His trust in me will plummet. If I manage to win the case, my reputation might be preserved, but if I lose, I'll undoubtedly be labeled as a heartless lawyer.

This line of argument is no good; the risk is too high when I'm not even sure I can secure an acquittal. If I get a reputation for betraying my clients, it'll affect my future work. That would be a serious problem.

"…Um, Mr. Yamashika. What should we do?"

Amagi said hesitantly. When I glanced to my side, Yukina was also waiting for my next words. Seems I got too caught up in my thoughts. But no matter how much I think, no solution comes to mind.

"Hmm, well, uh, let's see. For now, Mr. Amagi, is there anything else you're hiding?"

"…What do you mean? I killed my uncle. What other circumstances would I need to cover up?"

"Hmm, well, I suppose that's true."

Most clients, if they have any circumstances that would work against them, tend to hide them, even from their lawyer. That's just human nature.

In an ordinary case, it's usually those hidden circumstances that the prosecution discovers, leading to unfavorable developments later on. But on the other hand, something that seems unfavorable at first glance might unexpectedly turn into a breakthrough in the case.

However, it's hard to imagine someone who's already this resigned to their fate hiding anything at this point. If what he's told me is the whole truth, I have to find a breakthrough from here… but it feels utterly hopeless.

“I understand. Anyway, I’ve got the picture. From here on, I’ll do my best to secure a lighter sentence.”

“I’m counting on you.”

Amagi bowed deeply. Must be nice for him. All he has to do is wait while I try to lessen his sentence.

“That’s fine for you, but the real issue is on your side. If the police come to question you again, keep your mouth shut. Got it?”

“Understood. But I’ve already told the police everything, so I doubt there will be any more questioning.”

That’s likely. Especially now that they know I’m his defense lawyer.

“Well, if that’s the case, then fine. Just remember you don’t need to cooperate with the police anymore.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Alright, then we’ll head back for now. You just take it easy until the trial.”

“Um, there’s something I want to ask about that,” Amagi said, lowering his voice slightly. “There’s something called bail, right? Something that would let me get out of here…”

“Yeah, there is, but don’t get your hopes up. There’s no chance you’ll be granted bail. You planned and carried out a murder with intent, and you’ve confessed to it. There’s no way they’d grant bail to someone like that.”

“I see…”

Amagi looked rather shocked, his shoulders slumping.

Hmm. Could someone who wasn’t even afraid of being charged with murder really be this depressed over not getting bail?

Yukina was the one who answered my question.

“Mr. Amagi, you’re worried about your sister, aren’t you?”

Amagi lifted his head.

“Yes, that’s right. With me here for killing our uncle, she’s all alone now. From what the detective said, she’s currently in some sort of child welfare facility, but…”

Ugh, what a pain. Is it possible that I’ll have to take care of this sister of his too? You’ve got to be kidding me. One troublesome middle schooler is more than enough.

“I see. That’s unfortunate…” But fortunately, Yukina didn’t share my thoughts. “Losing both her parents, then having her brother arrested, and being taken to some facility without understanding what’s going on—that’s just too much.

Alright, Mr. Amagi. I’ll go check on her for you.”

Thank god. I’m really glad Yukina’s here at times like this.

“Yes, please. Just let her know that I’m doing fine.”

“Of course, no problem.”

“Thank you so much for everything. I really appreciate it.”

Amagi bowed deeply, looking relieved.

I’ll keep it a secret for life that, just for a second, I thought, “I don’t need any more baggage.”

“Uh, so, yeah, don’t worry about it.”

Adding that somewhat awkwardly, I hurried to end the conversation. Any more, and I might slip up.

December 17th, 1:00 PM, Yamashika Law Office

“So, you dumped the whole thing about Amagi’s sister on Yukina and came back here all by yourself?”

Before I knew it, that damn brat had broken into the office without permission and was lounging on the sofa, and now she paused her doodling with a mechanical pencil to make that remark.

“‘Dumped it on her’ sounds harsh. I didn’t dump anything on Yukina. It’s just about putting the right person in the right place.”

“I see~ You’re right, your specialty is insulting, belittling, cursing, and degrading people. Comforting or encouraging someone is definitely impossible for you.”

“I’m glad you understand. So, what are you up to? Doesn’t look like you’re reading. Surely you’re not studying?”

“Ugh.”

The brat, Satsuki, stiffened at my words.

"Studying at this time of year? That’s strange, the final exams should be over, right? It's too early to be doing winter break homework. Ah, I see now—you must be—"

I couldn’t help but grin.

"Taking a makeup test, aren’t you?"

"S-Shut up! Even I have moments where I let my guard down a bit! It’s just that I didn’t score well in math! That baldy of a teacher is so strict with grading, even though he’s terrible at teaching!"

"So, it is a makeup test."

"Ugh. Yeah, it’s a makeup test! Got a problem with that!?"

"Nope, no problem at all. But, you see, I've got to figure out what to do for the trial, and I don’t want to interrupt your studies, so I was thinking it might be best if the kid left now."

"Ugh, fine! I’ll leave! Studying at some dirty place like this is stupid anyway; I’d be better off going to the library! Hmph, don’t come crying to me if you lose the trial because I wasn’t around!"

Not that it mattered. Whether she was there or not, I was going to lose the trial anyway.

Anyway, with that, I managed to get rid of the annoying pest and create an environment where I could focus on thinking up a strategy for the trial.

"So, Kageno. I assume you heard the conversation?"

"…More or less."

When I brought up the topic, the bumbling detective, who had also somehow taken over the sofa, raised himself up.

"That’s how it is, so I need to figure out a strategy for the trial. Help me out."

"There’s really no need to help. There’s a quicker way to save yourself the trouble."

"I don’t want to hear it. You’re probably going to tell me to just raise the white flag or something like that."

"Yeah, you’re right. In other words, if you stop obsessing over acquittals or your winning streak, that’s all there is to it, right?"

"Take this seriously for once. If I don’t get Amagi acquitted, that poor kid’s sister will have to live alone for the rest of her life. Don’t you feel like you should do something about that?"

"Doesn't suit you, saying something like that."

"…"

I’m aware of it myself, but the last person I want to hear that from is Kageno.

"Well, either way, it’s your job to figure it out," Kageno continued. "Even you, the lawyer, can’t come up with a good idea, right? There’s no way I could give advice on something that tough."

He's gone and taken the easy way out. The fact that he’s right just makes it more annoying.

"Alright, fine. I was wrong to expect anything from you.

But there’s just one thing I want to ask. You don’t happen to know that detective, Hiromi Aizawa, that Amagi hired?"

"Not at all. Never heard of her."

"Tch. Detectives aren't exactly a common breed, so you should at least have more connections."

"I make connections when I need to, but I don’t have time to connect with every single detective. It’s a hassle."

Fair enough. I don’t have much in the way of connections with other lawyers either.

"Then, Kageno, can you get in touch with that detective?"

"That’s easy. It’s not a big industry, after all. But hey, you know where the detective agency is, so you could easily make contact yourself, right?"

"It’s smoother to have a fellow professional make the connection. I’d like to meet with them today, if possible. No, even sooner if you can—within the next hour."

"Always so sudden. Well, I don’t mind making a call, but what are you planning? Knowing you, it’s probably something shady."

"Don’t say things that make me sound bad. It’s nothing major. I was just thinking of asking them to investigate something far away."

"Investigate? Far away?"

Kageno tilted his head, puzzled by my intentions.

But this guy is sharp in strange ways. He soon cracked a thin smile.

"…I see. You’re planning to keep them out of the police’s sight, aren’t you?"

I exaggeratedly shrugged my shoulders in denial.

"Don’t be ridiculous. What are you saying? I’m a law-abiding citizen, you know. I wouldn’t do anything to obstruct an investigation. I just purely want to request their services."

"Yeah, you can say whatever you want."

"Well, interpret it however you like."

The truth is, as Kageno guessed, my real aim was to keep that female detective out of the police’s sight. If she got served with a subpoena, it was inevitable she’d testify against us in court. But a subpoena is powerless if the person doesn’t receive it.

As a good lawyer, I have no intention of interfering with the police or the prosecutor’s work. However, if the detective just so happens to be out on business somewhere in Kyushu or Hokkaido, unfortunately, she wouldn’t be able to receive the subpoena, and therefore wouldn’t be obligated to appear in court. Since the preliminary hearing date hadn’t even been set, this was the perfect time to do it. I wasn't doing anything wrong here.

"Anyway, see what you can do about it quickly."

"Yeah, yeah. If it’s just making a phone call, I’ll do it."

Kageno pulled out his cell phone and started dialing someone. I’ll leave this to him for now.

About ten minutes later, Kageno took the phone away from his ear and spoke first thing.

"Bad news."

"Dammit."

When this guy says "bad news" upfront, it’s really bad news.

"Did they refuse?"

"Yeah. Looks like things aren't going to go your way. The police are already putting pressure on them. They said they can't fulfill your request."

"Damn."

So they've already seen through what I'm trying to do? For such a dim-witted police force, they're acting surprisingly fast. Maybe they've gotten used to me tormenting them so much that they've started to wise up.

"But there's more. Apparently, they want to consult with you about something. If you're okay with it, they're willing to come over to the office."

Hmm. What was going on here?

With the police already applying pressure, what could they possibly want to discuss with me?

The situation wasn't entirely clear, but sometimes you have to take the tiger by the tail. Since they were willing to come and talk, there was no reason to refuse.

"Alright, have them come. As soon as possible."

"Got it. I'll let them know."

◆

Another thirty minutes later.

The detective who visited my office was, just as Amagi had described, a fairly young woman. She had her hair braided into pigtails and was dressed in a dull-colored suit. She might be considered pretty, but because of her understated makeup, she gave off a rather plain impression. Unlike Kageno, she didn't seem nearly as thick-skinned. But that was to be expected.

One more thing to add—Kageno, for instance, is the type of detective who, while always lounging around on the office sofa, is more suited to prowling around outside. But this female detective seemed more like the type to stay in a room and do research.

To be honest, she didn't strike me as the kind of detective I'd want to entrust with an important investigation.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Hiromi Aizawa."

The woman followed protocol and handed me her business card.

"Likewise. I'm Yamashika, an attorney."

I'm not a fan of exchanging business cards, but this time, I handed mine over obediently. This woman might become an ally. I needed to handle her with care.

"So, let's get straight to the point. Can you explain why you wanted to speak with me?"

"Yes. I heard from Mr. Kageno. You want me, the one who investigated Mr. Amagi's parents' cause of death, to go somewhere far away, correct? So that I won't have to attend the trial."

Damn you, Kageno, did you have to be that blunt? If it's discovered that I'm behind this, I could once again be at risk of losing my license.

I suppressed the urge to grimace, forcing a sales smile as I replied,

"Well, uh, that's one way to put it, I guess. I wouldn't say you're entirely wrong."

"Please don't misunderstand. I'm not on the police's side or anything. If it would help Mr. Amagi, I would gladly follow your suggestion and go somewhere far away. But it seems that the police have put pressure on the detective agency I work for, insisting that I absolutely must testify in court…"

"I see, I understand."

Just as I expected.

The police, or perhaps the prosecution directing them. Either way, they've acted quickly.

"Ms. Aizawa. It's certainly unfortunate, but since the police have already intervened, there's nothing we can do about it. Please forget about the suggestion I made."

"But I really don't want to make any statements that would disadvantage Mr. Amagi. On the other hand, I can't cause trouble for my company…"

She was oddly eager to support Amagi, this woman. Could it be that, since Amagi and this female detective were both young, the seeds of L-O-V-E had sprouted?

"…Mr. Amagi was the first client I ever handled."

Aizawa began to mutter quietly.

"A few months ago, Mr. Amagi came to our detective agency. Well, given his age, he didn't look like someone who could pay much, so they assigned me, the newcomer, to the case.

But since it was the first job I'd ever been entrusted with, I was very eager to do it."

"I see. That's understandable."

It was a reasonable story.

For instance, when hiring a lawyer, if the person was a veteran with several decades of experience, they might not approach the case with much enthusiasm unless it was particularly interesting or lucrative. On the other hand, if you brought your case to a rookie lawyer, they'd usually tackle it with great energy and care. Of course, that enthusiasm could sometimes be misguided.

"I sympathized with Mr. Amagi's situation and did a thorough investigation. I'm convinced that Mr. Amagi's parents were indeed killed by that man, Oniyama. Emotionally, I want to support Mr. Amagi. But since a detective agency can face serious repercussions if it antagonizes the police, I'm in a position where I have no choice but to give testimony that could harm Mr. Amagi…

So, I was hoping to consult with you, Mr. Yamashika, as a lawyer. I'm wondering if there's any way to avoid giving testimony."

"Hmm, I see."

This was certainly a welcome situation for me. A detective, who was supposed to be a witness for the prosecution, had come to ask how she could avoid testifying.

But finding a way to avoid testifying isn't easy. After all, trials rely heavily on testimony. If there were too many ways to refuse to testify, the system wouldn't function properly.

One of the few ways to avoid testifying is to simply not receive the subpoena, but if the police have already taken steps, that's likely impossible.

There are, however, other methods. For example, in cases of unavoidable circumstances, one can be excused from the obligation to appear in court.

But this "unavoidable circumstance" is rather vague. Illness, for example, could qualify, but if it's just a cold, you'd still be expected to show up even if it's a bit tough. And even if it's a serious enough illness to prevent attendance, the trial would simply be rescheduled, and you would eventually have to testify.

Moreover, the fact that this woman was a witness unfavorable to the defense was something the prosecution was already aware of. If she were suddenly unable to testify, I'd immediately be

suspected of orchestrating something. If, for instance, she were to be hit by a car tonight, the police would undoubtedly come to inspect my vehicle first.

Another possible route was the confidentiality obligation. The rule that says one must not disclose secrets known in the course of one's duties.

However, while strict confidentiality obligations are imposed on professions like doctors and lawyers, I had never heard of any legal regulations specifically for detectives. Of course, they probably signed confidentiality agreements when they take on a case, but they likely couldn't refuse a court order. If this were a conversation between a lawyer and a client, it would be protected by privilege, even against a court order. But detectives, who could simply claim to be one by opening an office, probably didn't have such legal protections. You could see that clearly if you looked at any lazy detective out there.

Hmm. It seemed I had reached a conclusion. The conclusion that I was out of options.

There was no longer any way to prevent this detective from testifying. In that case, the only remaining option was to try to get her on our side as much as possible.

"Ms. Aizawa. I fully understand your feelings, and I appreciate it. But since the police have already intervened, there's no way to avoid giving testimony. Please testify honestly in court. I'll do my best during cross-examination to ask questions that will help Mr. Amagi."

"Understood. I've heard of your skills, Mr. Yamashika. Please feel free to ask me anything during cross-examination."

That being said, I had no idea what I should ask during cross-examination at this point.

In any case, that was the end of the conversation with Aizawa. After the usual pleasantries and nods, I saw her out of the office.

"Hey, Kageno."

"…What?"

"In this situation, if you know of a way to secure an acquittal, please tell me."

"I told you before, don't ask me."

I was starting to feel genuinely anxious.

I had already run out of preemptive moves. If there was still a chance to win an acquittal, it would be by finding some mistake in the police investigation or illegal procedure during the preliminary hearing and muddling the trial.

But, as we had seen with the police already putting pressure on that detective, the prosecution was probably anticipating that I'd try a move like that. After all, I had used such tactics more than once. Frankly, the chances were slim.

At this point, I might as well give up on winning an acquittal at the preliminary hearing.

If we aimed for a reduced sentence instead of acquittal, there was a way to appeal to public sympathy. During the preliminary hearing, we could argue that the victim deserved to be killed, gaining public sympathy. If we could get public opinion on our side, the trial might go surprisingly smoothly. Even if we lost at the preliminary hearing, we might still secure a reduced sentence in the main trial.

"…Sigh."

—But then again, on second thought, that seemed unlikely.

To begin with, Amagi's motive for killing Oniyama was supposedly revenge for his parents and to protect his sister.

Sure, if you caught someone with their face buried in your sister's underwear, you might feel a surge of murderous intent, but actually killing them would be going too far.

And the other motive—revenge for his parents—wasn't particularly convincing either.

The problem is that there was no concrete evidence that Oniyama killed his parents. To put it bluntly, it was possible that Amagi killed Oniyama based on nothing more than a hunch. Indeed, as a third party, I had no idea whether this Oniyama guy was truly evil enough to commit murder.

Could someone who committed revenge based on a mere assumption really garner public sympathy? It seemed highly unlikely. If we could prove in court that Oniyama killed Amagi's parents, that would be a different story, but even if we were to re-investigate the incident that the police and a private detective had already thoroughly examined, the chances of finding new evidence are nearly zero.

If only Oniyama, who was shot, hadn't died. Even if he hadn't died, Amagi would still be charged with attempted murder, but at least we could put Oniyama on the witness stand. In that case, I might have been able to extract a confession during my cross-examination. They say dead men tell no tales, and they're right.

It was no use. No matter how much I thought about it, there was no way to resolve this situation.

"…Alright. I've made up my mind."

"Oh, you've decided? So, what's the plan?"

"First, I'll attend the preliminary hearing and see how the prosecution plays their hand."

Kageno shot me a rather cold look.

"Same as always, huh?"

"Shut up."

Here I was, desperately trying to find a way out of this predicament, and he had the nerve to be so insolent.

I considered assigning him some difficult task to make him sweat a bit, but unfortunately, in this case, there was no need to hunt for suspects or verify alibis, so I had to abandon the idea. The world was truly unfair.

And in the end, I wasted time doing nothing with Kageno, and before I knew it, the trial had arrived…

第二章
剣が峰裁判

Chapter 2-2: Trial on the Brink

December 18th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom No. 1

"We will now begin the preliminary hearing concerning the murder charge against the defendant, Seiichi Amagi."

The presiding judge declared.

And just like that, we were already at this stage. This time, there was no room for any clever tricks; there was nothing I could do.

The judge sitting at the bench was Judge Shudo, who had become a familiar sight by now. And beside him were the five jurors whose names I barely knew.

This time, Amagi, the defendant, was seated beside me, but Yukina was not. She was accompanying Amagi's younger sister, so she was watching from the gallery. Though she was still observing my performance, for some reason, it didn't feel quite as invigorating.

The only consolation was that instead of the Hyena Prosecutor Togasaki, it was Prosecutor Horiuchi sitting at the prosecution's table.

After all, I had thoroughly beaten that bastard Togasaki in the last trial. He wouldn't show his face so easily. Besides, in this trial, it was obvious to everyone that the defendant would be found guilty. In other words, no matter who the prosecutor was, my defeat was inevitable. Horiuchi must have stepped in for that very reason.

To back up that theory, Prosecutor Horiuchi's breathing was already heavy, and his eyes were filled with confidence, as if he was certain that this time, at long last, he would be able to wipe away the humiliation he had endured. To hell with that.

"Prosecutor Horiuchi, who is your first witness?"

"I would like to call Kazuo Umeda, the man who discovered the body and reported it to the police."

And so, the first witness of this trial took the stand.

Kazuo Umeda. On the day of the incident, he was one of the three friends who stayed over at the victim's house. According to Amagi, he was a "chubby man like a plum," and indeed, his body matched that description perfectly. Whether or not plums are fat is another matter.

"First, can you testify about your relationship with the victim?"

"I run a small company. Mr. Oniyama was the largest shareholder in my company. He gave me numerous accurate pieces of advice, helping to turn around the management of my company, which had been running in the red year after year. Because of that connection, we also had a personal relationship."

A personal relationship. The phrase conjured up some odd images in my mind—perhaps I'm just desperate.

"Next, did you know the defendant?"

"Yes, I've met him a few times, and I've also heard about him from Mr. Oniyama. Apparently, his parents passed away three years ago, and Mr. Oniyama, who is his uncle, became his guardian."

"On the night of December 14th, the day before the incident, you stayed at the victim's house, correct?"

"Yes. I stayed over at his house with two friends on the night of the 14th."

"For what purpose?"

"As I mentioned earlier, I had a personal relationship with Mr. Oniyama, and we had planned to go clay shooting over the course of two days, starting on the 14th. So, on the 14th, we decided to stay at Mr. Oniyama's large house."

"Then, please testify about your actions on the morning of Sunday, December 15th, the day of the incident."

"Yes. We had planned to leave early in the morning and grab breakfast at some place. So, I woke up around 7:30 AM, got myself ready, and waited in the living room for everyone to gather. However, while my friends who had stayed over with me were all present, Mr. Oniyama, the host, had not come down by 9:00 AM. We were wondering what to do when Mr. Oniyama's niece, whom he was looking after, went to check on him. Shortly after, we heard her scream."

"Where did the scream come from?"

"It came from Mr. Oniyama's room."

"Objection."

I stood up almost reflexively.

"You can’t determine the location just from hearing a scream."

"…Well, that’s a valid point."

The judge’s voice lacked enthusiasm. I could understand how he felt, though.

"Mr. Umeda, could you rephrase your statement more accurately?"

Prosecutor Horiuchi asked, his cheek twitching slightly.

"I understand. Let’s see, the scream came from the direction of Mr. Oniyama’s room."

"Proceed."

Hmm. Even I had to admit, this was nothing but petty harassment.

"What did you do after that?"

"I thought something was wrong, so I headed towards the source of the voice—Mr. Oniyama’s room."

"Please describe in detail the situation when you arrived."

"First, in front of Mr. Oniyama’s room, I saw the defendant and the aforementioned niece. The girl seemed to be very distressed, and the defendant was comforting her.

I wondered what had happened, so I peeked into Mr. Oniyama’s room… And that’s when I found Mr. Oniyama on the bed, covered in blood. It was clear that something terrible had happened, so I rushed over to Mr. Oniyama."

"Could you elaborate on the state in which you found the victim on the bed?"

"State…? Could you clarify?"

"For example, the position of the body—was he lying face down, or on his side?"

"Ah, yes. Let’s see, Mr. Oniyama was lying on his right shoulder, with his back turned towards the entrance of the room, and he was covered with a blanket."

"Did you notice where the victim had external injuries?"

"Yes, on his back. He had a large wound around his back, almost as if… well, like it had been gouged out with, let's say, a spiked club… No, more like a sword. The wound was so messy that it was unbearable to look at."

A spiked club, huh. If someone was gouged with that, it must have been excruciating.

"What did you do next?"

"I tried to check Mr. Oniyama's pulse by placing my hand on his neck. But his body was already as cold as ice, and there was no pulse at all."

"And then you called the police, correct?"

"Yes."

Prosecutor Horiuchi thanked the witness with a "Thank you," and concluded with "I have no further questions."

"Counsel, your cross-examination, please."

The judge addressed me.

Now, what should I do?

There's one point in the testimony that I can challenge. No, to be precise, it's not the testimony but the witness himself.

In murder cases, there's a saying: "First, suspect the person who discovered the body." If they were the first to find the body, they could have tampered with it before anyone else arrived, and one might think they became the first to discover it because they were the culprit. The same goes for trials; the testimony of the first person to find the body is extremely important and indispensable.

In this case, the first person to find the body should have been Amagi's sister. This is where she should be brought in as a witness. However, the prosecution hadn't done that.

The reason was easy to guess. It's partly because she's related to the defendant, but it's also because they judged that it would be too cruel to have a middle school girl describe the scene of a body shot to death with a shotgun.

Still, a lapse is a lapse, and this is the moment to bring the first person who discovered the body to the witness stand. But if I actually demand that the girl be brought in, it would severely damage my reputation. In this trial, I may need to argue for extenuating circumstances. I must avoid damaging my standing with the audience.

But still. I’m not patient enough to just let an obvious point like this pass by. Sure, I don’t think poking at this issue will lead to resolving the situation, but…

Oh, to hell with it, there’s no use overthinking this. I’m starting to care less and less.

Well, whatever. This is a trial where I’m destined to lose, so if I’m going to lose anyway, I might as well do it in a way that doesn’t add to my stress.

Yes, instead of conducting the cross-examination to solve the case, I should think of it as conducting the cross-examination just to mess with Prosecutor Horiuchi.

"Well then, Mr. Umeda, let me proceed with the cross-examination. First, you stated that you were the one who reported to the police, correct?"

"Yes."

"However, from what I’ve heard so far, you were not the first person to discover the body, were you?"

"Yes, that’s correct."

At this point, I turned to face the short prosecutor.

"Prosecutor Horiuchi. In murder cases, isn’t it extremely important to first call the person who discovered the body as a witness? Why did you not do so in this instance?"

"Allow me to respectfully respond," Prosecutor Horiuchi immediately countered. "Indeed, this witness was not the first person to discover the body. The first to discover it was the victim's niece, who is also the defendant's little sister, a thirteen-year-old girl. However, this girl was deeply shocked by the sight of her uncle's gruesome corpse. Even in a court of law, we deemed it inappropriate to make such a young girl testify here."

It was a smooth rebuttal, as if he had anticipated my question. But he likely wasn’t aware that I had anticipated his rebuttal as well. Without delay, I ignited the bomb and tossed it.

"In other words, the prosecution has no qualms about disregarding the proper procedures that should normally be followed, all in the name of so-called compassion?"

"What the—"

The courtroom buzzed, and Prosecutor Horiuchi's expression changed.

"What are you saying! Defense counsel, are you suggesting that we should drag a thirteen-year-old girl, who is mentally traumatized by seeing her uncle's body, into this courtroom and force her to relive that nightmare?"

"No, I never said anything of the sort. I simply want to point out that the prosecution, despite being in a position where they must meticulously prove the details of the case, has no hesitation in allowing sentiments like human compassion to obstruct the pursuit of truth."

The courtroom buzzed even louder than before.

Prosecutor Horiuchi first turned red in the face, but quickly regained his composure and, on the contrary, looked as if he had just claimed a great victory.

"Very well. If you insist, we shall summon that girl as a witness. Defense counsel Yamashika, I didn't think you were such a heartless person. Go ahead and question the girl as much as you like, and scar her heart if you must."

I grinned and immediately declared to the entire courtroom.

"Based on Prosecutor Horiuchi's latest statement, I would like to reassert my point. Prosecutors are such ruthless people that they have no hesitation in dragging an innocent young girl into this courtroom and forcing her to relive a nightmare, all to protect their own reputation."

"What the—!"

For the third time, the courtroom buzzed. But this time, half of the buzz was composed of laughter.

And Prosecutor Horiuchi, now truly red in the face, shouted,

"Y-You! You were the one who demanded that the girl be summoned in the first place!"

"Oh dear, I don't recall making such a demand at all. I merely pointed out that there was an issue with the prosecution's approach to proving the case. If you're dissatisfied, why don't you review the records? Prosecutor Horiuchi, just because you're good at falsely accusing people, doesn't mean you should drag me into it."

"Grrr!"

Prosecutor Horiuchi let out an incomprehensible groan. The giggling from the gallery only fueled his anger further.

But in the midst of this courtroom, there was one person who neither laughed nor got angry, but simply looked tired and wore a sullen expression.

It goes without saying—it was the judge.

"And so—Defense counsel."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Are you satisfied now?"

"Yes, I am."

"Very well. Prosecutor, please proceed with further questioning or call the next witness. Also, the recent exchange was nothing more than a personal quarrel between defense counsel and the prosecutor, so jurors, you may dismiss it from your memory."

Judge, did you really need to go that far? Well, it’s probably not wise to argue and make him even angrier. I backed down obediently.

Indeed, I can’t help but feel that I overdid it a bit. Plus, the judge's expression has been getting a bit scarier.

"Ahem, well then, the next witness is Detective Inaba."

Having somewhat regained his composure, Prosecutor Horiuchi called Detective Inaba, who wore a similarly sullen—no, beastly—expression as the judge, to the stand.

"You were the detective in charge of investigating this murder case, correct?"

"Yes, that’s right."

"First, could you testify about the investigation you conducted after arriving at the scene?"

"Understood. Well, first of all, the police arrived at the scene and began the investigation shortly after 9:30 AM on the 15th, the day of the incident. It was clear that the victim had been murdered, so we sent the body for an autopsy, conducted a forensic examination of the scene, and then questioned the individuals who were present in the house at the time."

"What was the condition of the crime scene?"

"First of all, there were no signs of a struggle. Bloodstains were confined to the bed where the victim had been lying and its immediate surroundings. There were no signs that anyone had entered through the windows, nor was there any evidence of anything being stolen."

"In other words, it wasn’t a robbery or similar crime."

"That’s correct. Also, although there was a significant amount of blood splattered at the scene, there were no bloodstains under the victim’s body. This indicates that the victim’s body hadn’t been moved at all after death, suggesting that the perpetrator shot the victim while he was lying in bed."

"Very well. Was there anything else of note?"

"There was a shotgun placed in the victim’s room. Upon investigation, we found that the victim had a license for two shotguns, and this appeared to be one of them. There were also gun maintenance tools around, which suggested that he might have fallen asleep in the middle of maintaining the gun. That’s all we could confirm during the initial investigation."

"What did you do after that?"

"After leaving the search of the area to the forensics team, I gathered the five individuals who were in the house at the time and began questioning them."

"Who were these five people?"

"First, the defendant, then the victim’s niece—who is also the defendant’s sister, as I mentioned earlier. Then there was Mr. Umeda, who just testified, and the other two people who stayed at the victim’s house, Mr. Matsui and Mr. Takeshiba."

"Please testify about what you learned from these interviews."

"On the day before the incident—on the 14th—the victim and his three friends were drinking until after 11:30 PM."

"So, the victim was killed sometime after 11:30 PM on the 14th?"

"That’s correct."

"Was there anything else that caught your attention?"

"Yes. There was one other thing that stood out."

"And what was that?"

"The defendant and the victim had a deep relationship, with the victim acting as the defendant’s guardian, and they had lived under the same roof for three years. However, during the questioning, despite the fact that the victim had been found brutally murdered, the defendant showed absolutely no signs of grief."

Once again, I stood up reflexively.

"Objection. That’s nothing more than the witness’s personal opinion and assumption."

"No, your objection is baseless," Prosecutor Horiuchi shot back. "Detective Inaba is an experienced officer who has handled numerous murder cases, and his testimony is based on that experience."

"Objection overruled."

Is that so.

"With that, I’d like to conclude my questioning of this witness for today."

"Defense counsel, do you wish to cross-examine?"

"No, I have no further questions today."

Damn it, there’s no opening to exploit. This is why I absolutely hate witnesses who are accustomed to court.

"Next, we will call Dr. Eboshi, who conducted the autopsy on the body."

A middle-aged man with pale skin, who was overly familiar—perhaps even physically familiar to me—and slightly overweight, commonly known as "White Pig," took the witness stand.

"First, I’d like to ask, what was the cause of the victim’s death?"

"It appears to be traumatic shock due to being shot with a shotgun. The victim was shot slightly to the left of the back, right around the heart."

"Dr. Eboshi, I believe you’ve brought the X-rays of the victim?"

"Yeh, here they are."

Dr. Eboshi pulled out a large black photograph.

At this point, Horiuchi’s assistant prosecutor brought over a board on casters with a clatter. The photograph was attached, and when the switch was pressed, the board lit up, making the X-ray image clear.

The photograph was centered around the victim’s chest area.

As it was an X-ray, only the bones were visible as white shadows, but there was also a large, round white shadow right around the heart.

"Dr. Eboshi, please explain."

"Yeh, certainly. As you can see, this white shadow in the chest area is the shotgun pellets. It's a bit hard to see from a distance, but if you look closely, you'll notice that tiny pellets, each about two millimeters in diameter, are densely lodged in there.

The pellets concentrated within a roughly twenty-centimeter radius and inflicted severe damage to the lungs, heart, blood vessels, bones, and other organs in the chest area. Most of the organs necessary for sustaining life were hit, so there's no doubt the victim died instantly."

For some reason, Horiuchi took the X-ray photograph and approached me.

"Defense counsel, if you need this photograph, I can give it to you. Will it be of any use?"

"..."

I saw no need to respond, so I silently snatched the photograph from the shorty prosecutor's hand.

Prosecutor Horiuchi exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders in a theatrical manner and returned to his seat. Damn it, he could have just handed it over quietly instead of wasting time with this nonsense. Useless prosecutor.

When I looked closely at the photograph, I could indeed see the small shotgun pellets densely embedded around the heart. Well, knowing that doesn't really change anything.

But shotguns are truly terrifying. Even with just a quick glance at the photograph, I could see that there were probably hundreds of pellets lodged in there. If you get shot with something like this, of course you'd die instantly.

"Next question. Can you estimate the time of death?"

"We can narrow it down to between midnight and 1:00 AM on the 15th."

"What is the basis for that estimate?"

"Postmortem lividity and rigor mortis."

"Could you first explain in detail what postmortem lividity is?"

"Certainly. Postmortem lividity, as the name suggests, refers to the blotchy patterns that appear on a corpse. When a person dies, the blood gradually coagulates. As the heavier blood settles in the lower parts of the body due to gravity, it manifests as a reddish-black pattern on the skin. This is postmortem lividity."

"And what is rigor mortis?"

"Like postmortem lividity, it's a phenomenon that occurs a certain amount of time after death. As the name implies, it refers to the stiffening of the body. Let me delve into some technical details—"

At this point, Dr. Eboshi deliberately cleared his throat. I wasn't the only one who thought he could have spared us this explanation.

"When a person dies, the energy source known as adenosine triphosphate stops circulating sufficiently within the body. As a result, certain proteins that control muscle contraction—namely myosin and actin—cease to function, leading to the stiffening of the body."

In other words, you die, nutrients stop circulating in your body, your muscles stop moving, and you become stiff. Whether it's actin or whatever, was there really a need to bring up such terms? It's a bad habit of people in the sciences to drone on about things no one asked for.

"Thank you for the explanation. Finally, Dr. Eboshi, how did you determine the estimated time of death based on postmortem lividity and rigor mortis?"

"Yeh. Postmortem lividity begins to appear about twenty minutes after death, but for a few hours, it can shift or fade if pressure is applied or the body is moved. However, after about eight to ten hours have passed, it no longer fades even under pressure. This is because the coagulated blood has leaked out of the blood vessels and spread into the skin tissues.

Similarly, rigor mortis reaches its peak stiffness after ten to twelve hours.

I performed the autopsy on the victim's body around 10:30 AM on the 15th. At that time, the victim's body showed postmortem lividity that didn't fade even under pressure, and the degree of rigor mortis had reached its peak.

From this, we can infer that the victim died approximately ten hours earlier, around 12:30 AM. However, since there is some individual variation in these postmortem phenomena, taking that margin of error into account, I concluded that the estimated time of death was between midnight and 1:00 AM on the 15th."

"Thank you. I have no further questions."

"Defense counsel, you may cross-examine."

Damn it. I've always had a visceral dislike for testimonies from science-minded people, and I don't particularly like them on a rational level either. Their statements are undoubtedly logical, which means that without specialized knowledge on my part, there's no way to find a counterargument.

I have an acquaintance who's a rotten civil servant with a hobby of messing around with corpses. He's also a science-minded guy and has a habit of babbling on about things no one asked for…

I desperately tried to recall his words. Postmortem lividity, rigor mortis—I do have some recollection of hearing about both.

"…Dr. Eboshi. I have a couple of questions. Postmortem lividity can shift if the body is moved after death, rendering it unreliable as a basis for judgment, correct?"

"Right, that's correct."

"So, if the victim's body had been moved without your or anyone else's knowledge, wouldn't that significantly throw off your estimated time of death?"

"No. Didn't Detective Inaba testify earlier that the victim was killed on the bed and showed no signs of having been moved? Therefore, there's no need to take that into account."

Ugh, damn it. He did say something like that.

How could I have forgotten something that had already been testified to? What a blunder. But I can't let myself get rattled here. I must remain calm and proceed with the next question.

"Next question. You mentioned that the victim was shot in the heart, correct?"

"That's right. Though it would be more accurate to say the left chest area rather than the heart."

"If the heart is shot, there would be significant bleeding, wouldn't there?"

"Of course."

"When there's significant bleeding, isn't it true that postmortem lividity is much less likely to appear?"

"It's true that in cases of death from blood loss, postmortem lividity is less likely to appear, as you said. However, it doesn't mean it won't appear at all. Additionally, in this case, the victim was shot in the heart and died instantly. In other words, the blood flow stopped immediately, so there wouldn't have been much bleeding."

"…No further questions."

This is hopeless. There's no way to counter this.

"The next witness is Mr. Morizo Kikukoro, who is an instructor at a training course for aspiring shotgun owners."

M-Morizo Kikukoro? What's with that name? It sounded like some kind of mascot from an expo. Not that I had any right to criticize someone's name.

However, I didn't recall anyone by that name coming up in Amagi's story. He was called an instructor, but I wonder what kind of witness he was supposed to be.

The man who eventually took the stand looked to be in his fifties and had an appearance that made me think he might be related to Detective Inaba.

In other words, he had a yakuza-like appearance.

"What is your occupation?"

"I'm a police officer."

I knew it.

"You give lectures to people who want to possess guns for hunting or competitive purposes, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And you yourself possess a shotgun, correct?"

"Yes. I use it for hunting and clay shooting."

"How long have you been in possession of a shotgun?"

"Let's see, it's been over twenty years now."

"As you've heard," the shorty prosecutor said as he glanced around the courtroom, "you can understand that this witness is an expert on shotguns. Is that clear?"

I see, that's why they called this witness. Shotguns aren't exactly common knowledge. It makes sense to call in a witness with specialized knowledge to explain things.

Naturally, I had no reason to object, and with satisfaction, Prosecutor Horiuchi moved on to the next question.

"First of all, Mr. Kikukoro, is it easy to obtain a shotgun?"

"No, not at all. A shotgun is a legitimate firearm with sufficient lethal power, so it’s not something you can easily obtain."

"I see. Could you briefly explain the process of obtaining a shotgun?"

"Certainly. In Japan, if you want to possess a shotgun, you first have to apply at a police station and attend a lecture called the Beginner’s Training Course."

"This is the course that you teach, correct?"

"Yes, that’s right. In that course, you learn about the basic structure of a shotgun, as well as the firearms laws. At the end, there’s a written test to ensure you’ve understood everything. If you pass the written test, you can then take the shooting training course, where you have to pass a live-fire test. Only after passing this test can you obtain a gun license. Once you have the license, all you need to do is purchase the gun from a licensed gun store. However, the police conduct a thorough background check on the applicant to ensure that the license isn’t granted to anyone who might misuse the firearm."

As expected from someone who gives lectures in front of the public, his explanation was smooth and without hesitation.

"Next, could you explain how shotguns are handled—or rather, how they are managed?"

"Certainly.

First of all, in Japan, we have the 'one gun, one license' system. This means that to possess a single gun, you must have a separate license for it, and without this license, not only is it illegal to own a gun, but you’re not even allowed to touch one. Additionally, you can’t have two licenses for one gun. In other words, it’s forbidden to let other people handle or touch your gun.

Because of this, gun storage is also strictly regulated by law, and you’re required to store the gun in a place where no one else can access it. Moreover, the storage location must be made of steel plates at least one millimeter thick, and it must be equipped with a lock prevention device to ensure it can’t be opened accidentally. The regulations are very strict.

In Japan, you basically have two options: you can entrust your gun to a specialized business, or you can buy a gun locker specifically designed for storing firearms."

"The victim in this case, Mr. Kazutoshi Oniyama, also possessed a shotgun. So, he should have had a gun locker installed and stored the gun inside to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands, correct?"

"Yes, that's right. Especially since there were minors in the victim's household, he should have been particularly careful."

"Understood. Next, I'd like to ask about the shotgun itself. How does a shotgun manage to fire multiple pellets at once?"

"To explain that, I need to talk about the shotgun shells rather than the shotgun itself.

Shotgun shells are made up of a casing, a lot of lead pellets—what we call shot—and gunpowder. There's also one more component: a wad, which is a small cup-like piece placed between the gunpowder and the shot.

Let me explain step by step. When you pull the trigger of a shotgun, a firing pin strikes the back of the shell. This ignites the gunpowder, causing an explosion. The explosion energy pushes the wad forward. The wad then pushes the shot forward, causing it to accelerate and be fired."

"What happens to the wad after the shot is fired?"

"The wad is lighter and larger than the shot, so due to air resistance, it falls to the ground pretty quickly. Still, it can fly about ten meters or so."

…Wait a minute. Did Amagi ever mention anything about a wad? No, I don't think he did. The dumbfounded look on Amagi's face next to me made it clear he had no idea either.

So, did that mean Amagi left the wad behind in Oniyama's room after he shot?

"Next question. Ordinary handguns and rifles have spiral grooves in the barrel to give the bullet a spin and increase its accuracy, correct?"

"Yes. Because of this, bullets fired from handguns and similar firearms have unique rifling marks that are characteristic of that particular gun."

"But shotguns don't have that, do they?"

"That's correct."

"So does that mean that if someone is shot dead with a shotgun, it's impossible to identify which gun fired the shot?"

"No, while it’s certainly difficult, it’s not entirely impossible. For example, if the wad we just discussed is left behind somewhere, we can determine the manufacturer of the shell.

Additionally, while the shot itself doesn’t leave any distinctive marks, the shell casing that’s left behind after firing does. There are two marks that can be left on the shell casing. One is the firing pin mark. As I mentioned earlier, the firing pin strikes the shell when the trigger is pulled, and the mark left by the pin can vary between guns, so it’s possible to identify the gun that fired the shot to some extent.

Another point, not limited to shotguns, is that there are what we call semi-automatic or automatic guns. These are guns that automatically eject the spent shell and load the next one using the recoil from the gunpowder explosion. This is the type of gun you often see in movies.

Shotguns also come in semi-automatic varieties, and when these guns eject the spent shell, they leave a mark on the casing. By examining that mark, we can identify the shotgun just like with rifling marks."

"So, if the shell casing was fired from a semi-automatic shotgun, it’s possible to identify the gun that fired it, correct?"

"Yes, that’s right."

"Thank you. I have no further questions."

I see. As mentioned briefly in Amagi’s story, the police identified the shotgun used in the crime by these methods. In other words, if Amagi had disposed of the shell casings a little sooner, he might have avoided arrest. What a blunder. If you’re going to do something, do it perfectly.

"Defense counsel Yamada, do you have any cross-examination?"

"No, I do not."

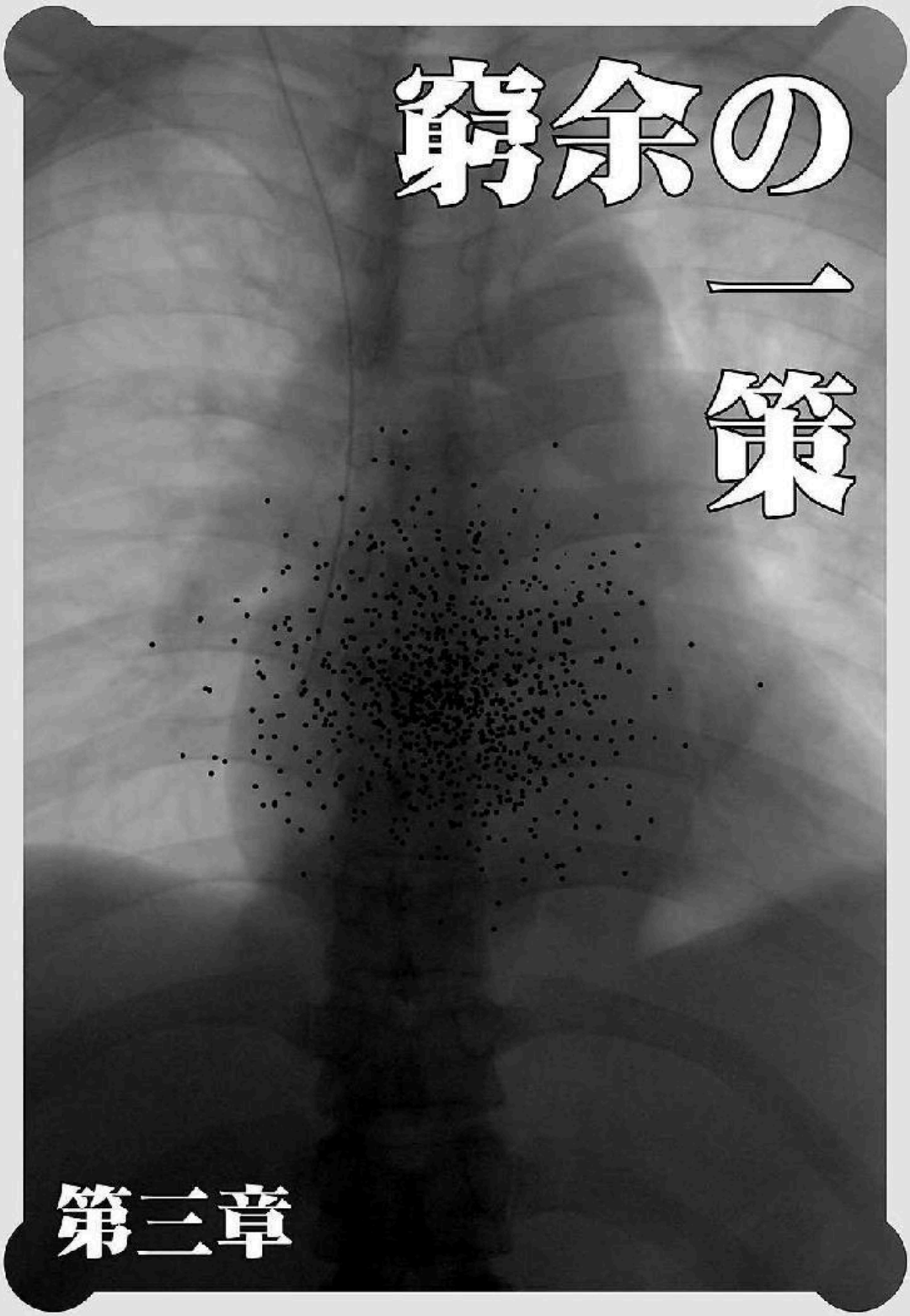
There was no room for cross-examination. I absolutely hate it when the prosecution calls witnesses just to show off their specialized knowledge.

◆

That was the end of the trial for the day.

As expected, given all the specialized testimony, I ended up finishing the first day without being able to mount any decent counterarguments, just as I had anticipated.

And as if that wasn’t enough, I had no hope for the trials to come. I headed home with a heavy heart, only to face the second day of court.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第三章

Chapter 2-3: Desperate Measure

December 19th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom No. 1

Day two of the trial.

Still bursting with unnecessary confidence and energy, Prosecutor Horiuchi enthusiastically called the first witness of the day.

"As our first witness today, I call Mr. Shigeki Matsui."

According to Amagi, he's a man "sturdy like a pine tree," and just like Umeda the day before, his name matched his appearance. Whether a pine tree is really that sturdy is another matter.

"On the day of the incident, you were staying at the victim's house along with yesterday's witness, Mr. Umeda, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Between midnight and 1:00 AM on the 15th, the estimated time of the victim's death, did you hear any noises?"

"Yes. I believe it was around 12:30 AM when I heard the sound of a shotgun."

"According to our investigation, there was heavy rain and thunder in the area around that time. Are you certain that what you heard was a shotgun in such conditions?"

"Yes, I am. I also do clay shooting, and the sound of a shotgun is quite distinct. In terms of volume, it's comparable to thunder. But the quality of the sound is different from thunder, so even in a thunderstorm, you can tell the difference. That was definitely the sound of a shotgun."

"That's all. Defense, your cross-examination?"

Hmm. According to Amagi, this guy initially testified that he heard the gunshot just after midnight. But now, he's clearly stating that he heard it at 12:30 AM.

Well, considering he was drunk and half-asleep when he heard the gunshot, it's not unreasonable that he might have confused midnight with 12:30 AM. In fact, considering that Amagi shot Oniyama around 12:30 AM, this testimony is almost certainly true.

But even if it's true, that doesn't mean I have to accept it at face value. It's a bit of an unreasonable situation, but that's what a trial is. Let's mess with him a little.

I stood up and began my cross-examination.

"Mr. Matsui, what were you doing before you went to bed?"

"I was chatting with Mr. Oniyama, Mr. Umeda, and the others."

"And you were drinking alcohol at that time, weren't you?"

"…Well, a little."

"So, you were drinking?"

"Y-Yes."

"And then, feeling sleepy, you all decided to call it a night and went back to your rooms to sleep?"

"…Something like that."

"I see, I understand. Now, there's something I'd really like to ask you. Do you think the testimony of someone who was drunk and drowsy is reliable?"

"Wha… what do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said. To be honest, I find it hard to believe that your testimony is reliable when you were so drunk you were about to fall asleep."

"No, I definitely heard the gunshot! Sure, I had a bit to drink, but I'm someone who can hold their liquor! I've never once blacked out from drinking!"

There was a bitter chuckle from the gallery. Indeed, this wasn't something to emphasize.

"Is that so? But putting aside whether you can hold your liquor or not, there's something about your testimony that doesn't make sense to me."

"W-What is that?"

"You heard the sound of a shotgun in the middle of the night, around midnight, correct?"

"Yes."

"And yet, despite that, you didn't contact the police or go to check on things. You just went back to sleep, didn't you?"

"Uh… T-That's true, but…"

"Isn't that a bit strange? If you just heard a bang in the middle of the night, people might not call the police. But if you knew it was a gunshot, anyone would report it. You testified that you knew it was the sound of a shotgun. And yet, you just went back to sleep as if nothing happened. How do you explain that?"

"Well… I was too sleepy to stay awake…"

"But you recognized it as a gunshot, right? Didn't you wonder if someone might have been shot? And yet, you just went back to sleep without checking?"

"Well, you see, there was thunder that night too, so I wasn't really sure if it was a gunshot or not… uh, no, never mind."

I smiled slyly.

"That's what I wanted to hear. So, in other words, when you first heard the gunshot, you weren't sure if it was really a gunshot, were you?"

"Well… you could say that…"

"I see. By the way, when the police questioned you, did they ask you something like this? 'Do you remember hearing a gunshot around 12:30 AM?'"

"N-No, they didn't. I volunteered the information about the gunshot before the detective asked us. I told them I heard the gunshot around midnight."

"Just now, you said you heard it around midnight?"

"…Ah. Y-Yes, well…"

"But didn't you just testify that the gunshot was at 12:30 AM?"

"Well, yes, that's what it seemed like…"

"So why did your testimony change from midnight to 12:30 AM just now?"

"Well, that's because… I mean, at first, I thought I heard it just after midnight, but later I remembered it was probably around 12:30 AM…"

"So, something must have happened to change your memory?"

"…W-What do you mean?"

"You said you volunteered the information to the police. You told them you heard a gunshot just after midnight. But later, didn't the police ask you, 'Wasn't it around 12:30 AM when you heard the gunshot?'"

"Well… yes, they did ask me that later."

"So, you were influenced by the police's suggestion? As a result, your testimony changed from hearing the gunshot around midnight to hearing it at 12:30 AM?"

"I-I object! T-This is an attempt by the defense to trap us with malicious intent—"

"You don't need to explain your reasons," the judge said. "In any case, objection overruled. Mr. Matsui, please answer the question."

I like judges who understand.

"Well, yes, I suppose you could say that. But you know, I was drunk at the time, and I was half-asleep, so I thought it was around midnight, but it might have been 12:30 AM after all…"

"So, you can't accurately determine what time you heard the gunshot?"

"Well, n-no, I suppose not. …Yes, you're right."

"That's all for the cross-examination."

Well, that's about right.

In a trial where the defendant has confessed to shooting at 12:30 AM, I'm not sure how much good this does, but at least I got some satisfaction out of it.

Just then, Horiuchi, who had been looking frustrated, suddenly stood up.

"Your Honor, may I have a moment? The next witness we planned to call was Investigator Inaba for a follow-up, but I'd like to call another witness to reinforce Mr. Matsui's testimony and dispel any doubts the defense may have."

"I see. Is that witness present in the courtroom?"

"Yes. I just need a little time to confer with them."

"Very well, let's take a ten-minute recess. Defense, do you have any objections?"

"I don't like this."

"So, no objections. We'll take a ten-minute recess."

"..."

I hate judges who don't understand.

The judge banged the gavel once and quickly left the bench. The courtroom immediately buzzed with noise.

Now then, I wondered who our dear Prosecutor Horiuchi planned to call next. But that question would soon be answered.

Horiuchi approached a tall, lanky man sitting in the gallery and began speaking to him in a low voice.

"Hey, Amagi. Do you know who that is?"

He asked the defendant sitting next to him.

"Ah, that's Mr. Takeshiba. One of the three guests."

I see. I had a feeling it was him when I saw that lanky figure.

◆

Ten minutes later, just as expected, Horiuchi had Takeshiba take the witness stand and began questioning him.

"Mr. Takeshiba. Like Mr. Matsui and Mr. Umeda, you were also staying at the victim's house on the day of the incident, correct?"

"Yes. I was staying in the room next to Mr. Matsui."

"And you also have experience with clay shooting and have heard the sound of a shotgun before, right?"

"Yes, many times."

"Then, Mr. Takeshiba. Did you hear the sound of a shotgun around 12:30 AM on the 15th?"

"Yes, I did. However, like Mr. Matsui, when I first heard the sound, I couldn't immediately determine if it was really a shotgun.

I mean, think about it. You don’t usually hear gunshots in a residential area. I just assumed it was some out-of-season fireworks or maybe something short-circuited because of the thunder.

But the next day, when I found out that Mr. Oniyama had been killed with a shotgun, I became convinced that the sound I heard was indeed a gunshot."

Horiuchi turned to the judge and briefly said, "That will be all."

Hmm, so this is the witness meant to reinforce Matsui’s testimony.

With just one person, it might not be enough, but with two people both hearing the gunshot at the same time, it becomes quite persuasive. Well, in reality, there’s no arguing that Amagi did fire the shot at that time. Even though turning white into black is a feature of trials, it’s going to be a bit difficult to overturn the testimony of two people.

However, there was one thing about Takeshiba’s testimony that bothered me. When the judge ordered the cross-examination, I decided to address that doubt immediately.

"Mr. Takeshiba. According to our investigation—" Actually, it’s something I heard from Amagi. "When you were first questioned by the police, while Mr. Matsui testified that he heard a gunshot, you apparently denied hearing any such sound at all, didn’t you?"

"Yes, that’s correct."

"And yet, now you’ve completely reversed your testimony. Why is that?"

"Well, as I mentioned earlier, at first I didn't think it was a gunshot…"

"But you said you didn’t hear anything, not even an explosion. So why did your testimony suddenly change to hearing a gunshot?"

"Well, the detective asked me to think carefully, and then I remembered."

"Oh, the detective, huh? Mr. Takeshiba, didn’t the police perhaps ask you something like this? 'If we can prove that Seiichi Amagi fired a gun around 12:30 AM, we can arrest him. Do you remember hearing a gunshot around that time?'"

Takeshiba hesitated for a long time, but finally, he gave up and said,

"Yes, well, they did ask me something like that."

"You know, that kind of questioning is commonly referred to as leading the witness. Are you familiar with that term?"

"I obje—"

"That will be all!"

I forcefully cut off Horiuchi’s response.

Horiuchi glared at me for a moment, looking frustrated, but perhaps confident that this wouldn’t change the outcome of the defendant’s guilt, he quickly regained his composure and smirked.

"The next witness will be Investigator Inaba again."

So, it’s that yakuza-looking detective again. If they’re calling him to testify a second time, it means this trial is entering its critical phase.

"Detective Inaba, please testify about the circumstances that led to the defendant’s arrest."

"Understood. First, on the day of the incident, we knew that there were five shotguns in the victim's house. These included the three shotguns brought by the clay shooting group—Mr. Matsui, Mr. Takeshiba, and Mr. Umeda, who have all testified here—and the two shotguns owned by the victim, Mr. Oniyama. Of these, the three guests had stored their shotguns in inconspicuous places in their respective rooms. The two shotguns owned by Mr. Oniyama were stored separately, one in Mr. Oniyama's bedroom and the other in the gun locker along with the ammunition.

However, upon investigation, we found that the key to the gun locker was placed in an easily accessible location, making it possible for anyone to open it.

We first decided to determine which of these five shotguns had been used in the crime."

"And how did you investigate that?"

"The wads. As you may recall from the testimony of Chief Inspector Kikukoro yesterday, when a shotgun is fired, wads are ejected along with the shot. While the wads themselves aren’t particularly powerful, they can easily travel about ten meters. If they hit a person, it wouldn't be surprising if they embedded themselves, but in this case, it seems the wad hit the victim’s bone, got covered in blood, and fell onto the bed."

"And what did you learn from the wad?"

"Yes. The wad found in the victim’s body was from the same manufacturer as the ammunition stored in the gun locker by the victim.

Furthermore, we hypothesized that if the perpetrator was skilled in handling shotguns, they wouldn't have left evidence like a wad at the crime scene. In other words, we theorized that the crime was committed by someone not familiar with shotguns.

Since Mr. Matsui, Mr. Takeshiba, and Mr. Umeda had all taken courses and were licensed to own shotguns, they didn't fit this profile. That's when we first began to suspect Mr. Amagi—the defendant."

"And why the defendant? Isn't his sister in the same position?"

"You're absolutely right. However, while his sister seemed deeply shocked by the victim's death, the defendant didn't appear to be grieving at all."

"I see. And then?"

"Yes. Assuming he was the perpetrator, it seemed likely that the gun used was the one stored in the gun locker, which anyone could easily access. So, we conducted a thorough examination of the gun locker, specifically looking for any fingerprints of the defendant."

"Did you find anything?"

"Yes. We found a hair. We had the five residents of the house provide DNA samples and determined whose hair it was. As expected, it turned out to be the defendant's.

We didn't mention the hair to the defendant but instead tried to trick him. We asked if he had ever opened the gun locker. But he denied it, even though we had found his hair there.

At that point, we were convinced he was lying, so we got a warrant and searched his room."

"Did you find anything?"

"A bloodstained shell casing. From a shotgun."

As expected, the courtroom buzzed with excitement.

"And what happened after that?"

"I informed the defendant that we had found the shell casing in his room and told him that with the casing, we could determine if the gun from the locker had been used.

At that point, perhaps realizing he couldn't escape, the defendant confessed. He admitted to killing the victim."

There were slight differences in the story from what Amagi had told me. Or rather, some details were missing. What happened to the part about the cellphone emails? Well, since the case for Amagi being the culprit was already strong enough, they probably didn't want to bother with any unnecessary complications.

"What was the defendant's motive for killing the victim?"

"Yes. According to the defendant's confession, it was like this:

The defendant's parents died in an accident three years ago. Our police investigation concluded that the cause was falling asleep at the wheel, but the defendant wasn't convinced and hired a private investigator to look into it. The result was that suspicion arose that the victim, Mr. Oniyama, had deliberately caused his parents' deaths."

"And what happened next?"

"Yes, Mr. Amagi confessed to the crime, but we can't punish someone based solely on a confession, so we searched for evidence to corroborate his confession. That said, all we did was have the shell casing found in his room examined. As a result, we first learned that the blood on the casing belonged to the victim.

Also, as Chief Inspector Kikukoro testified yesterday, by examining the marks on the shell casing, you can determine to some extent which gun was used. The investigation revealed that the shell casing was fired from the shotgun stored in the gun locker where the defendant's hair was found."

"You have that shell casing with you now, correct?"

"Yes."

As expected, Prosecutor Horiuchi submitted the bloodstained shell casing as Prosecution Exhibit A following this line of questioning.

"No further questions. Thank you."

Horiuchi looked more satisfied than ever before.

"Defense counsel Yamashika, you may cross-examine."

The details differed, but Amagi's story was largely consistent. There was almost no room for cross-examination.

But out of sheer stubbornness, I stood up and began the standard cross- examination.

"Detective Inaba, you testified that the wad found on the bed was from the same manufacturer as the bullets the victim possessed, correct?"

"Yes."

"Just for reference, I'd like to ask, are there many manufacturers that handle shotgun shells in Japan?"

"…Well, I believe there are only a few."

"I see. So, is it possible that the shells the victim owned were the kind commonly used by anyone who practices clay shooting?"

"…Well, they are rather popular, yes."

"In that case, on the day of the incident, there were three other people besides the victim who owned shotguns at that house. Was there anyone among them who used shells from the same manufacturer as the victim?"

"That… Well, yes, there were."

"Could you tell us that person's name, just for reference?"

"Objection! Simply using the same type of shells as the victim does not justify bringing that person's name into this discussion!"

"Well, I don't think that's quite right," said the judge. "Since the prosecution brought up the issue of the wad's manufacturer during direct examination, the defense's question is reasonable. The objection is overruled. Witness, please answer the question."

"…Indeed, Mr. Umeda and Mr. Matsui were also found to be using the same type of shells."

I turned to look at the two people sitting in the gallery.

They appeared visibly agitated. No, it might be more accurate to say they seemed panicked. It was only natural to react that way when your name came up in a situation like this. Honestly, I didn't think this line of questioning was actually meaningful.

This was bad. I was starting to feel like I was completely out of options.

"…No further questions."

"Now, as the prosecution's final witness, we call Hiromi Aizawa."

Good grief, just as I was losing my motivation, we finally reached the last witness. At this point, it might be better to just get this over with quickly so I can be done with it.

The witness the prosecution called next was a young woman I recognized. She was the private detective who came to my office a few days ago.

"What is your occupation?"

"I'm a detective. I work for the Fujimi Detective Agency."

"Have you ever been hired by the defendant to conduct an investigation?"

"Yes. To be precise, he brought a request to our detective agency, and that job was assigned to me."

"When was this?"

"It was around autumn… so about two or three months ago."

"What was the nature of the request?"

"He said he lost his parents three years ago and wanted me to investigate the cause of their deaths in detail."

"So, the defendant had doubts about the cause of his parents' deaths, correct?"

"Yes, well, I suppose so. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have brought such a request…"

"So first, what was the cause of death for the defendant’s parents?"

"It was a traffic accident. They were returning from somewhere when the accident occurred. The police concluded that it was caused by drowsy driving, but Mr. Amagi couldn’t accept that conclusion. He didn’t believe that his father, who was a safe driver, could have caused such an accident."

"And then you accepted the request and started the investigation, correct?"

"Yes."

"Could you testify about the results of that investigation?"

"Yes. To get straight to the point, I came to the same conclusion as the police. It was indeed a case of driver error, or rather, careless driving.

However, there was one thing that concerned me. While investigating the accident, I looked into where his parents had been that day. It turned out that on that day, they had met with a man named Kazutoshi Oniyama."

The courtroom buzzed slightly.

"In other words, the victim of the current case, correct?"

"Yes."

"What were the three of them doing together?"

"That much I couldn't find out. What is clear is that on the day of the accident, his parents went to a villa owned by Mr. Oniyama, and according to the caretaker, Mr. Oniyama was definitely at the villa that day."

"So, what did you investigate after that?"

"I thought there might be some connection between the traffic accident and Mr. Oniyama, who was the last person to meet his parents. So I suggested to Mr. Amagi that I investigate Mr. Oniyama in detail."

"And the defendant agreed to that?"

"Yes."

"And what did you find?"

"The results only heightened our suspicions. I discovered that just a few days before the accident, Mr. Oniyama had personally imported a drug called melatonin from overseas."

"What kind of drug is this?"

"…Ah. Um, sorry. Melatonin is the name of the active ingredient. The drug itself had a different name."

Horiuchi looked slightly irritated.

"It doesn't matter. In any case, it was a drug that contained a large amount of melatonin, correct?"

"Y-Yes, that's right."

"So, what exactly is melatonin?"

"Well… It's a substance that is naturally secreted in the human brain when it recognizes darkness. Essentially, this secretion makes us feel sleepy at night. However, the secretion of melatonin decreases as we age, which is why children sleep ten hours a day, but as we get older, our sleep duration shortens—"

"Wait, wait a moment."

At this point, Prosecutor Horiuchi interrupted the testimony.

"Ms. Aizawa, we understand what melatonin is, so could you testify about its specific effects?"

"Oh, yes, understood," Aizawa replied, blushing slightly. "In short, it's a sleep aid. Although it's something that's naturally secreted in the human brain, supplementing it externally can help people fall asleep more comfortably, or something like that. Also, it's known for having almost no side effects and being quickly absorbed."

"So, the victim personally imported this drug a few days before the accident?"

"Yes. Although the drug itself is not yet approved in Japan, there are no regulations against importing it from overseas."

"Did you uncover any other facts?"

"We found out that around the time of the accident, Mr. Oniyama was financially troubled. He was hit hard by the credit crunch that was a nationwide issue at the time. He was apparently going around asking various people to lend him money, claiming that if he could just get some funds, he could double it in no time, according to the testimony of an acquaintance.

However, just three months after the accident occurred, despite his financial troubles, Mr. Oniyama somehow managed to secure funds from somewhere."

"Did you find out the source of those funds?"

"Yes. It was the inheritance left by Mr. Amagi's parents."

Once again, the courtroom buzzed.

"Why was Mr. Oniyama able to do such a thing?"

"Mr. Oniyama became the guardian of Mr. Amagi and his siblings after their parents passed away and they were left orphaned.

Naturally, the right to inherit the estate left by the parents belonged to Mr. Amagi and his siblings, but since they were minors at the time, that estate was placed under the management of Mr. Oniyama, their guardian. In other words, Mr. Oniyama was in a position where he could access the estate at any time."

"Are you saying that Mr. Oniyama took advantage of that position to embezzle the inheritance?"

"Yes, that's correct. However, in the end, Mr. Oniyama didn't reduce the estate by a single yen. He borrowed money from the estate without permission, invested it, and made a profit, which allowed him to later return the funds he had used."

"Still, the fact remains that he accessed the estate, correct?"

"Yes, that's right. The bank records clearly show it."

"But if that investment had failed, the estate would have been diminished, correct?"

"Yes. The investment happened to succeed by chance."

"That's sufficient. You reported the results of your investigation to the defendant, correct?"

"Yes."

"What was the defendant's reaction at that time?"

"He was biting his lip intently."

"If the victim, Mr. Oniyama, had indeed maliciously given drugs to the defendant's parents, killed them, and used their estate for his own benefit—wouldn't it be natural for the defendant to harbor murderous intent toward the victim?"

I stood up and slammed my fist on the desk. "Objection, that question is based entirely on speculation. I see no necessity for it to be answered."

"Sustained."

"No further questions."

Hmm. Today, Prosecutor Horiuchi is really going out of his way to discredit the victim. In a normal criminal trial, he wouldn't do something like that. The more he argues that the victim was a bad person, the more people will sympathize with the defendant.

But on the other hand, the more he argues that the victim was a bad person, the more the jury might think, "Well, he deserved to be killed." This leaves no room for debate regarding the

murder charge. Of course, in that case, it’s human nature to think, "Maybe we should give a lighter sentence," but ultimately, it’s not the jury that decides the severity of the punishment. The judge, who would never lighten a sentence just because "the person killed deserved it," is the one who makes that decision. So, this prosecution strategy is a sound one.

"Defense counsel, do you have any cross-examination?"

"No, nothing in particular."

"Very well. That concludes the prosecution's witness testimonies. Tomorrow, the defense will begin presenting its case. Is that clear, defense counsel?"

"Yes."

Of course, there was nothing at all that could be a problem. In fact, could we just skip tomorrow’s trial altogether?

"Then, we’ll adjourn for today."

And so, with everyone in the courtroom, myself included, fully convinced of the defendant’s guilt, the first half of the trial ended.

December 19th, 1:00 PM, Yamashika Law Office

The afternoon after the trial ended and I returned to the office.

"What do you think, Mr. Zenko? Can we secure Mr. Amagi’s acquittal?"

Yukina asked, unable to hide her anxiety, hitting me right where it hurt.

"W-Well, we’re having a bit of a tough time, but I’m not just focusing on winning the preliminary hearing. There’s still plenty of room to turn things around."

"Y-You’re right. Everything will be fine… right? We’ll definitely be able to bring Mr. Amagi back to Yumi, right?"

"Yeah, it’ll be fine. Leave it to me, I’ve always managed to pull it off before, haven’t I?"

Even I had to admit I’d gotten pretty good at bluffing. But it seemed to finally put Yukina at ease, and she said she’d go make some tea for me, heading off to the kitchen next door.

But—who the heck was Yumi again? Well, whatever.

So, around 1:30 PM, while I was still wracking my brain with this and that, I had an unexpected visitor at my office.

"Yo."

"…You bastard."

Kudoku Ujigami. I don't want to go into too much detail, but he's an acquaintance of mine, a father of one who makes his living by messing around with corpses every day.

"What the hell are you doing here, Ujigami? I didn't call for you."

"Well, I heard from the wife that you were having a tough time in court. I figured I'd use my lunch break to come check on you."

"Hmph, knowing you, you probably just came to laugh at me."

"Yeah, that's right. Ha! Serves you right, you loser Yamashika."

"Yukina, bring me some salt."

"I'm just kidding, just kidding. So, the victim in this case was shot dead with a shotgun, right? I've never handled a body like that before. As a defense attorney, you get access to crime scene photos, right? I was hoping you'd let me see them for reference."

The absolute worst. I'm sure you couldn't find another guy like him in all of Japan, showing up at a law office for such a reason.

…But well, let's put that aside for now. I should use whatever I can. If a corpse expert comes to me asking to see photos of the body, there's no reason not to take advantage of that.

"Fine, take a look if you want."

I handed him the envelope containing the X-ray photos I had taken from Prosecutor Horiuchi.

Whistling cheerfully, Ujigami eagerly opened the envelope, but his expression quickly turned to disappointment.

"What the hell, is this all there is?"

"Yeah, that's it. What were you expecting?"

"I was hoping for some color photos of a mangled corpse, of course. What's the fun in looking at just some bones? I once saw an autopsy photo of a shotgun victim in a textbook, and it was

something else. The person’s upper body was completely shredded. The flesh was torn so finely that you couldn’t even tell the meat apart from the blood vessels —it was quite a sight. That’s what I was hoping for."

I couldn’t help but feel sorry for this guy’s kid as he talked so gleefully about such things.

At the same time, a question suddenly crossed my mind.

"Wait a minute, Ujigami. Are you sure we’re talking about the same kind of shotgun? Even from those photos, you can see that all the pellets stayed inside the body. No matter how much of a shotgun it is, it doesn’t have enough power to blow off the upper body, does it?"

"No, that’s because the pellets were small. With larger pellets, a person can be blown apart with ease."

"Larger… you mean the caliber?"

"No, while there’s some difference in caliber, what really matters is the size of the pellets. Even with the same caliber, the power of a shotgun changes depending on the size of the pellets. This body was shot with pellets used for clay shooting, right? The really small ones."

"Oh yeah, they did say something about a diameter of two millimeters."

"Thought so. For anti-personnel rounds, they use pellets with a diameter of about nine millimeters. Those are powerful, you see. It’s like being hit by multiple handgun bullets at once. A human body is as good as a paper doll."

A human body blown apart by nine-millimeter pellets? I couldn’t quite picture it.

"Hold on a sec. If the pellets are bigger in diameter, doesn’t that mean there’d be fewer of them in the shell?"

"That’s right. A clay shooting shell can hold hundreds of small pellets, but with larger ones, it’s only around a dozen or so."

"See? Even if the pellets are small, there’s a lot of them in there. Wouldn’t that make them just as powerful?"

"Yeah, no. That’s common sense, isn’t it? Don’t you know anything about physics?"

"…Do I look like I do?"

"No, my bad. You’re right, everyone wonders how you even became a lawyer in the first place."

And I’m just as baffled as to how you got into med school.

"Alright, let me explain it simply. It’s pretty straightforward: air resistance is proportional to the square of the diameter of a flying object, but the energy is proportional to the cube of the diameter. So, as the diameter increases and the weight per pellet increases, it encounters less air resistance. That’s why it’s more powerful. See? Simple, right?"

"Ah, I understand perfectly,"

I said, lying through my teeth.

Basically, the larger the diameter of the pellets, the more powerful they are, right? Why do science types always have to make simple things so complicated?

"Well, let’s set aside those trivia bits for now. More importantly, Ujigami, didn’t you find anything suspicious when looking at that photo?"

Ujigami looked at the photo again and said,

"Hmm, just looking at an X-ray like this, I can’t make heads or tails of it. This is actually the first time I’ve seen an X-ray so densely packed with pellets. It might actually make for some good teaching material, yeah."

What a completely irrelevant thing to say.

"Damn it, so you’re not any help at all. What the hell did you even come here for?"

"Hey now, don’t be unreasonable. Sure, I’ve seen bodies with all sorts of causes of death, but in Japan, you don’t really come across many gunshot victims. Not unless you’re up in Hokkaido or somewhere like that."

"Hokkaido? Why bring up Hokkaido?"

"They say hunting is really popular up there. And because of that, there are also a lot of accidental shootings."

"Oh, I see."

Now that he mentioned it, there did seem to be a lot of news stories involving shotguns that came out of Hokkaido, like how deer populations had increased, or how Steller’s sea eagles swallowed lead pellets. Not that it really mattered.

Ujigami held the X-ray up to the fluorescent light again and peered at it.

"But man, those clay shooting pellets really are something. How many of them are in there?"

"How the hell should I know? They said it was 24 grams of pellets with a diameter of 2 millimeters. Do the math yourself."

"Hmm. Still, I wouldn't want to have to deal with a patient that came in shot up like this. I'd have to dig all of these out one by one."

He never had anything useful to say.

"Oh yeah? Well, you've got it easy. No matter what kind of patient comes in, you don't have to bother treating them."

"What are you talking about? Sometimes I even stitch up their big wounds so they can have an open-casket funeral."

"Oh yeah? That's real nice of you."

…In the end, Ujigami left as soon as his lunch break was over. What the hell did he even come here for?

Relying on Ujigami in a pinch didn't work out. Now things were looking really bleak.

Or so I thought, right up until that moment.

"Hmm…"

Yukina was staring hard at the X-ray photo, deep in thought.

Seeing Yukina so intently focused and thinking was kind of refreshing and cute… Not that I had the luxury to entertain such thoughts.

"What's up, Yukina? Something on your mind?"

"Oh, yes. There's just one thing that's really bothering me. Remember how Mr. Ujigami was saying that, unlike doctors, people who examine corpses don't usually dig out all the pellets?"

"Yeah, he did say that."

"Well, I think I might be able to help you out, Mr. Zenko. Could you take me to the crime scene?"

Any reason to say no? None at all. I've heard it said that walking somewhere with the opposite sex could be defined as a date. So, did that mean Yukina had just asked me on a date?

…No, thinking about it any further was just making me sad, so I'd stop.

December 19th, 1:50 PM, Oniyama Residence

This was my first time stepping foot in here. Since this was where the crime took place, I probably should have come to see it at least once before the trial started. But honestly, given that our only defense strategy was to appeal for leniency, I didn't see much point in visiting. I left it alone in the end. I don't think that decision was necessarily wrong, though…

Even though several days had passed since the incident, there were still police officers guarding the entrance.

As soon as one of the uniformed officers spotted me, he quickly approached and said,

"Is there something you need? …Oh, it's you!"

He looked at me with a startled expression, as if he suddenly remembered seeing my face on a wanted poster… What was that supposed to mean?

"I'm Yamashika, the defense attorney. I need to take a look at the scene for the defense."

"…Understood. Feel free to look around as much as you like. However, while you're in this house, I'll have to monitor your actions closely."

"Is that on Prosecutor Horiuchi's orders?"

"Yes. But you're free to look around as you please. Go ahead."

And just as he said, the officer really did follow me around.

Could it be that he thought I was going to fabricate evidence or something? If so, that's seriously underestimating me. I'm a man of integrity, after all. There's no way I'd tamper with the scene or fabricate or alter evidence.

But it seemed this officer had been given very strict orders from Prosecutor Horiuchi, as he really did monitor my every move. Since he wasn't doing anything particularly obstructive, I just had to endure it, which was a bit annoying.

Aside from the officers guarding the place, there was no one in the house. Well, naturally. Amagi was in detention, his sister was in a facility, and the original owner was in the afterlife.

"So, Yukina, where do you want to look?"

"Yes, the bedroom where the crime took place."

So, that was the room with the bloodstained bed. I felt a bit reluctant to show Yukina such a place, but since she was so insistent, I had no choice.

But when we got to the crime scene, the bedding had been removed—probably by the police—so there weren't any large bloodstains left. Though, there were still spatter marks on the walls and floor.

Perhaps because it wasn't a pleasant sight, Yukina's face turned pale. But she seemed to have something on her mind, as she was carefully examining the walls and bed.

After thoroughly inspecting the room, Yukina turned to me with a determined look on her face.

"Just as I thought."

Did she find something? If she did, that would be great, but…

She glanced at the officer monitoring us and said,

"Why don't we step outside? I'd rather not discuss this here…"

"Yeah, good idea."

We left the Amagi residence and returned to the car.

Seated in the passenger seat, Yukina suddenly said something that completely took me by surprise.

"Mr. Zenko, it's possible that Mr. Amagi might actually be innocent."

"W-What? What do you mean?"

Her words were completely unexpected.

Not, "We might be able to prove Amagi's innocence," but "Amagi might actually be innocent," she said. That couldn't be right. All the evidence, every testimony, and even his own confession pointed to Amagi's guilt.

"Take a look at this."

What Yukina handed me was the X-ray photo—the one showing the pellets embedded in the victim's body.

"T-This? What about it?"

"Well, you see—"

◆

"No way! No way, no way, no way, no way, NO WAY!!!"

The instant Yukina told me her theory, I couldn't help but shout.

This couldn't be happening. There was no way something so simple, so ridiculous, could be true.

Amagi shot and killed Oniyama. He admitted to it, and there was evidence supporting it. There was no room for doubt. Anyone could see that Amagi was guilty of murder.

But—

I quickly looked at the X-ray photo. I took my time, confirming for myself what Yukina had pointed out.

…She was right.

Could something like this really be possible? When I compared this new fact against everything that had come up in the trial so far…

Not only did it fit perfectly, but it even explained why that man made the statements he did. The true reason behind them was starting to come into focus.

At this point, I had no choice but to reach the same conclusion as Yukina.

In other words, Seiichi Amagi, who was charged with the murder of Kazutoshi Oniyama, might actually be innocent.

"Yukina, you're amazing. This is all thanks to you."

"Oh, thank you."

Yukina beamed with a bright smile. Truly, an angelic smile.

This means I might actually be able to keep my winning streak intact—I mean, get Seiichi Amagi back to his sister.

I started the car. The next thing I needed to do was confirm this with Amagi, who was still in detention.

You watch out, Horiuchi, Takeda. After all, it’s fate that the clients I defend end up being found innocent.

単純な結論
第四章

Chapter 2-4: A Simple Conclusion

December 20th, 10:00 AM, District Courtroom No. 1

"Defense counsel, are you ready?"

"Yes, no problem at all."

Responding to the judge's question, I straightened my back and confidently answered with a bold demeanor.

"Then, who is your first witness?"

I grinned and looked at Prosecutor Horiuchi. My overly relaxed attitude must have caught his attention, as Horiuchi seemed puzzled.

Seiichi Amagi, charged with the murder of Kazutoshi Oniyama, was innocent.

To prove that, I first needed to hear the details from that man.

"First, Detective Inaba."

Detective Inaba stood at the witness stand, his usual stern face filled with caution. He probably suspected that I was planning some kind of trick.

"Detective Inaba. Just to confirm one thing, when you informed the defendant that a cartridge case was found in his room, what exactly did you say?"

"Huh?"

Detective Inaba asked back, looking confused.

"Uh, I don’t quite understand the question."

"It’s exactly as I said. You told the defendant that a cartridge case was found, didn’t you?"

"Well, yes."

"What exactly did you say?"

"…I told him that a cartridge case was found in his room. That’s all."

"You said it was found in his room, right?"

"Yes."

"But you didn’t say where in the room it was found?"

"…Uh, no, I didn’t."

"Then, please tell us specifically now. Where in the defendant’s room was the cartridge case found?"

Detective Inaba tilted his head slightly and answered plainly.

"It was in the trash can."

"N-No way!!"

The one who shouted in a voice that echoed through the courtroom was Seiichi Amagi.

Amagi stood up, his face utterly incredulous, his mouth trembling.

"Defendant, what’s with the sudden outburst? Keep quiet."

Scolded by the judge, he reluctantly returned to his seat.

"Thank you, Detective Inaba. No further questions."

"…No cross-examination," said Prosecutor Horiuchi, his face finally turning its usual pale shade.

"I would like to question the defendant himself as the next witness for the defense."

The courtroom buzzed.

Having the defendant testify is a double-edged sword, as it gives the prosecution a chance to cross-examine.

But there are ways to avoid that risk.

One such way is to use the rule that "cross-examination can only cover topics raised during direct examination."

"Mr. Amagi. After you shot the victim, did you hide the cartridge case in your room?"

"Uh, yes."

"Where did you hide it? Was it in the trash can?"

"No, it wasn't. I hid it inside a thick magazine that I hollowed out. I would never hide it in an obvious place like the trash can."

The courtroom was enveloped in silence.

Everyone was dumbfounded, replaying Amagi's testimony in their minds.

But as they grasped the meaning of his testimony, a slight murmur arose. Why was Amagi's account different from that of the detective? Is the defendant lying? And if so, why would he need to lie about something like that?

"I have no further questions."

"Prosecutor Horiuchi, do you have any cross-examination?"

"Uh, yes."

Prosecutor Horiuchi stood up hastily. He must have realized that it would be inconvenient to proceed with the trial while leaving such a question unresolved.

However, the only thing he could cross-examine about was the cartridge case, which I had just brought up. There's nothing to be afraid of, no matter what questions he asks.

"Uh, Mr. Amagi. You said you hid the cartridge case inside a magazine after you shot the victim, right?"

"Yes."

"But Detective Inaba testified that he found it in the trash can. That seems strange… Let me change the question a bit. After committing the murder, weren't you quite agitated?"

"Well… yes."

"Right. So, because of that agitation, even though you threw the cartridge case—evidence item A—into the trash can, you mistakenly thought you had hidden it in the book, right?"

"No, that's absolutely not true. I planned meticulously to kill my uncle. I decided from the start to hide the spent cartridge in the book, so I even prepared by cutting out the inside of the magazine in advance. There's no way I would've thrown it in an easily discoverable place like the trash can."

Prosecutor Horiuchi was at a loss for words.

"But you admit you were agitated?"

"Yes, well…"

"I have no further questions."

Question marks floated all around the courtroom. Yes, this is how my trials should go.

I stood up again to call the next witness.

"Now, I apologize for the somewhat confusing sequence, but I would like to have Detective Inaba take the stand again."

Detective Inaba, unable to hide his agitation, took the stand.

"Detective Inaba, I'd like to ask you a few more questions.

First, you found the cartridge case in the trash can in the defendant's room. Is that correct?"

"…Yes, that's correct."

"But you heard the defendant's testimony earlier. He testified that he didn't hide it in such a place. Why do you think that is?"

"I can't say. All I can tell you is that the cartridge case was found in the trash can."

"I see. Then next—currently, Mr. Amagi's house, where the incident occurred, is under police control, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I visited the scene yesterday, and while I was there, I was under police surveillance the entire time. It seems the police are being quite sensitive about not letting the scene get disturbed, aren't they?"

"Indeed, that's true. Normally, we wouldn't go to such lengths, but we made arrangements in a hurry after hearing that you were the defense counsel."

There was a smattering of chuckles. This isn't something to laugh about, though.

"So, the scene has been perfectly preserved this time?"

"Yes, you're right about that."

"And does that scene include the defendant's room?"

"…At least until the defendant was escorted to the police station, it was untouched. After that, it was under our complete surveillance."

"To be precise, after finding the cartridge case in the defendant's room's trash can, it was under complete police surveillance, correct?"

"That's correct."

"That's enough."

I turned to the judge.

"Your Honor. I'd like to resolve the doubts that have arisen here and now.

I request that you immediately dispatch someone to the crime scene, and, along with the officers guarding the site, search the defendant's room. The location to search is—"

"The inside of the book, correct?"

The judge cut me off. Well, I'll let that slide.

"Yes, exactly."

"Your Honor," Prosecutor Horiuchi stood up. "The prosecution would like to object. This is nothing more than one of the defense counsel's usual stunts, a mere stalling tactic, and it's clear that the defense's intent is to muddle the trial—"

Prosecutor Horiuchi continued to ramble on, but eventually, the judge cut him off.

"Prosecutor Horiuchi. I understand what you're trying to say. However, given that there's such a blatant contradiction in the testimonies, and if it can be resolved simply by sending someone to the scene, there's no reason for us to reject the defense's proposal. Even if that proposal comes from Attorney Yamashika."

…What was that supposed to mean, Your Honor?

"Uh, well, yes, I understand what you're saying, but still…"

"Now, let's leave it at that. It should take no more than thirty minutes by car from here to the crime scene. Let's take a short recess."

◆

And thirty minutes later.

In the courtroom, now enveloped in an unprecedented sense of tension, the judge solemnly began to deliver the results.

"Uh, everyone, please remain calm and listen. We just received a report from the people I sent to the crime scene. Under the supervision of the officers guarding the scene, they examined the book that the defendant mentioned…"

At that point, for some reason, the judge let out a sigh.

"They found it. The shotgun cartridge case. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that there was a liquid resembling blood on the cartridge case."

At that moment, the courtroom was engulfed in a heavy silence.

Prosecutor Horiuchi looked as if a favorite toy had been taken away from him and seemed on the verge of tears.

"Now then, defense counsel," the judge looked at me—more like glared at me.

"Considering your actions and words earlier, it seems you had anticipated this outcome."

"That’s correct. Just to be clear, at least in this case, I did not employ any trickery. When I visited the scene, I was under constant surveillance by the police."

"The phrase 'at least in this case' is rather curious, but indeed, I’m not suspecting you this time. However, will you be able to explain why two cartridge cases were found?"

"That’s an easy task. To explain, I’d like to call a witness."

"Understood. Who will you question?"

I grinned and named a certain expert.

"Dr. Eboshi."

As soon as the busy White Pig doctor stood at the witness stand, I immediately got to work.

"Dr. Eboshi, let me start by asking: I hear that fatal accidents involving shotguns are extremely rare in this prefecture?"

"…Indeed, I myself hardly ever see them."

"Next, have you ever fired a shotgun?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then, how much do you know about shotguns?"

"…I know that they're guns that fire a lot of pellets."

That hardly qualified as knowledge.

"In other words, while you may have extensive knowledge in conducting autopsies, you're not particularly familiar with shotguns?"

"If you want to put it that way, then yes, that's correct."

Exactly as I thought.

"Have you ever conducted an autopsy on a body that was shot with hundreds of shotgun pellets, like in this case?"

"No."

"Then, one more question. Do you know how many pellets were in the shotgun shell used in this incident?"

"No, I don't."

"I see. Actually, when my secretary looked at the X-ray photo you submitted, she found something a bit odd. This photo—"

I held up the X-ray photo.

"Doesn't it seem like there are too many pellets? So, I did a little research. According to my findings, in the case of a 2mm-diameter, 24- gram shell, it would contain nearly 500 pellets.

Now then—"

I approached the prosecution's desk, holding the photo in one hand, and without asking for permission, I borrowed one of Prosecutor Horiuchi's pens. Of course, I didn't use my own pen purely to annoy him.

Then, I approached the witness stand and handed the photo and pen to Dr. Eboshi.

"Sorry to trouble you, but Dr. Eboshi, could you count how many pellets are visible in this X-ray photo?"

"What! All of these!?"

"Yes, all of them."

"I mean, I can count them if you ask me to, but it’s going to take some time, you know?"

"Don’t worry about that. This is a courtroom. As long as it’s for carrying out justice and seeking the truth, they’ll give us all the time we need. Right, Your Honor?"

Suddenly being addressed, the judge replied vaguely,

"…That’s true."

Reluctantly, Dr. Eboshi took off the pen cap and started counting, one, two, three, and so on, in a slow, methodical process.

"No, that’s impossible…"

About five minutes had passed.

When Dr. Eboshi let out a groan and put down the pen, I quickly asked,

"How many were there?"

After glancing at Prosecutor Horiuchi two or three times, Dr. Eboshi hesitantly replied.

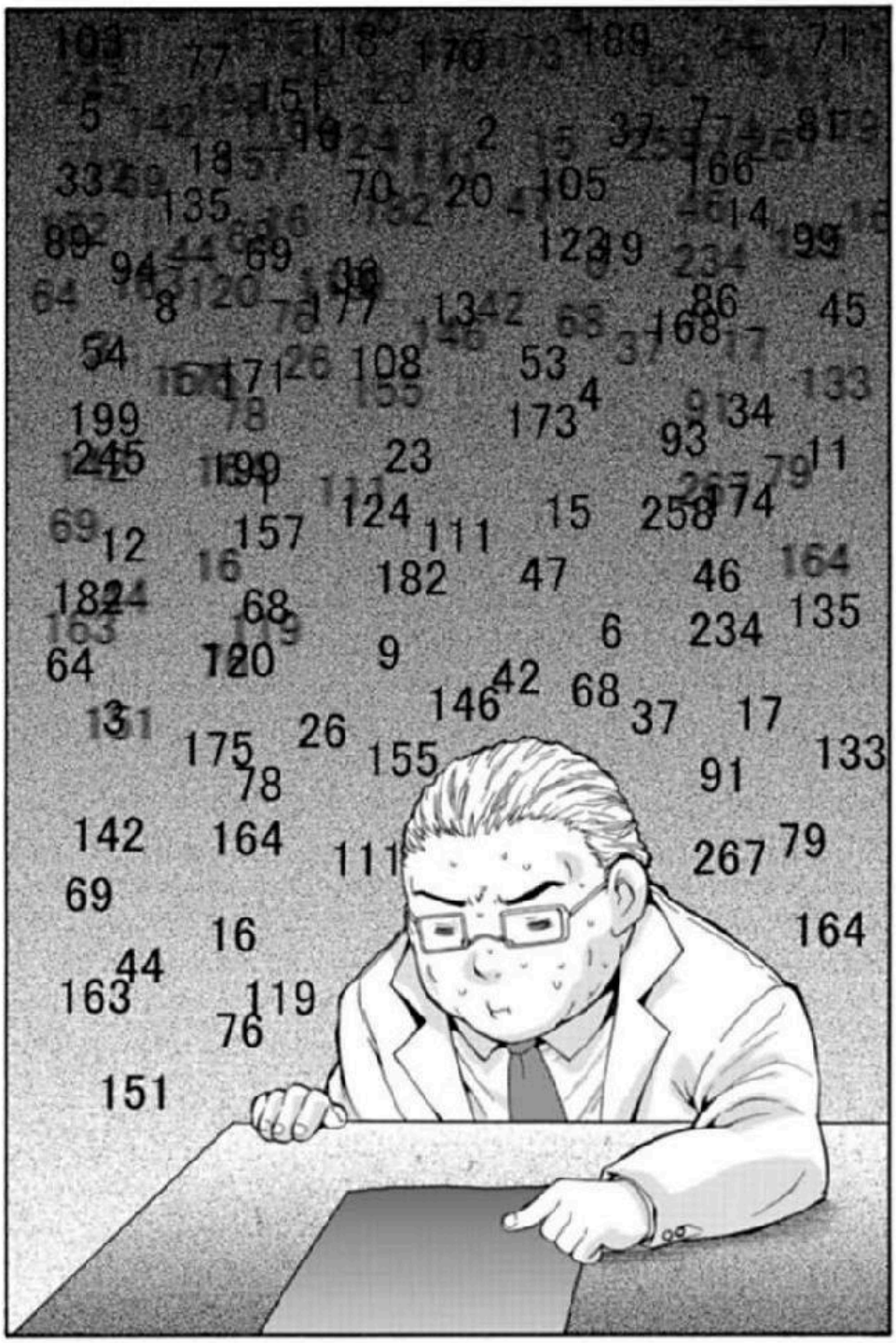
"…Over 950."

Once again, the courtroom was filled with a heavy silence.

Prosecutor Horiuchi looked so dumbfounded that I wondered if his jaw had become unhinged, staring blankly with his mouth wide open.

"D-Defense counsel," this time, even the judge couldn’t hide his astonishment. "C-Can you explain what this means?"

"It’s no trouble at all, Your Honor."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I straightened my index finger and began to speak to the entire courtroom.

"Why were there twice as many pellets in the victim's body as usual? Why were two cartridge cases found? It's not a complicated matter. It's simple, clear, and obvious. In other words, the victim, Mr. Kazutoshi Oniyama, was shot with a shotgun in the same spot twice.

In other words, before the defendant shot him, he had already been shot and killed by someone else."

After a brief silence—

"W-What the hell!!!"

The courtroom was filled with shouts of shock.

Yes, this was the whole truth.

Seiichi Amagi, charged with murder, was innocent. Because shooting a corpse did not constitute murder. If there was any crime, it would be the crime of desecrating a corpse.

"Order! Order in the court!"

The judge restored order to the courtroom with his usual phrase and gavel, then turned back to me.

"Defense counsel, I understand your argument. However, there are still some doubts. First, how do you explain the two cartridge cases with blood found in the defendant's room? Moreover, if the victim was shot twice with a shotgun, there should be two wads, and in the first place, there should have been two gunshots heard."

"Indeed, there are many questions. I will explain each one.

First, about the cartridge cases, that's a simple matter. The real culprit secretly hid his in the defendant's room to frame him. That's why there were two cartridge cases in the defendant's room.

Next, regarding the wads, remember Detective Inaba's testimony. What did he say yesterday? He testified that the wad found near the victim's body might have been left behind because the perpetrator, unfamiliar with shotguns, forgot to take it. This means, conversely, that the real culprit, being familiar with the use of shotguns, unlike the defendant, did not forget to take the wad. That's why only one wad has been confirmed so far.

And as for the gunshots that should have been heard twice, remember this. First, on the night of the incident, there was unseasonal thunder. Moreover, it was the middle of the night. It's entirely possible that people missed hearing the gunshots due to sleepiness.

In fact, Mr. Matsui, who testified about hearing the gunshot, specifically mentioned that he was drowsy and groggy from alcohol, and he couldn't even give a clear testimony about the time of the gunshot, only saying it was after midnight."

"J-Just a moment, defense counsel. Are you saying that there's another culprit?"

"Of course. Since someone shot the victim before the defendant did, there must be another culprit."

"W-Who is it?"

"If you permit it, I would like to call the final witness for the defense."

The courtroom stirred.

"I-It's already been identified!?"

"Well, yes. I have an idea."

"V-Very well. Please proceed with the witness."

"Thank you. Then—"

I had an idea who the culprit was. Based on the sequence of events that Amagi told me about, and the testimonies in the trial so far.

When I considered all of that together, only one person came to mind as someone who might have killed Oniyama on the day of the incident.

I grinned and looked at a certain person sitting in the gallery.

And seeing how that person was visibly agitated, I became even more convinced.

"Could you please come up here, Mr. Takeshiba?"

I beckoned him with my hand. Finally, the time had come. The moment when I could torment the real villain in a public forum.

Takeshiba's face turned so pale that I worried he might be having a heart attack. But pressed by the gazes of those around him, he staggered up to the witness stand.

"Now then, Mr. Takeshiba, I'm going to ask you a few questions."

"W-Wait a minute. I-I don't understand why I'm being called up here at this time."

"Oh, come now, what a great sense of humor you have. But that's beside the point. Now that you're on the witness stand, you have an obligation to answer questions, but you have no right to ask them.

So, let's get right to it. First, about your relationship with the victim—he was the largest shareholder in your company, wasn't he?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"In other words, you were often ordered around by him, and you grew to resent it. Isn't that right?"

"No, that's not true."

"So, you thought: if he were to die, the shares he owned would be passed on to someone else, making things easier for you. Isn't that so?"

"T-That's not true! What evidence do you have to make such a claim?"

I ignored him.

"Furthermore, you reasoned that on the night of the incident, several shotguns and people with the same motive as you would be gathered at the victim's house. If you shot the victim then, you wouldn't be caught because shotguns don't leave rifling marks to identify the gun that was fired. You came to the same conclusion as the defendant. And just to be safe, you decided to use the victim's poorly secured gun rather than your own, to further reduce suspicion. Isn't that right?"

"No, no! I never thought of such a thing!"

"We currently know of two cartridge cases and one wad. Additionally, the victim's body contains the remnants of two shotgun blasts, but the second wad has yet to be found. Presumably, the culprit took it to avoid leaving any trace. However, as in the case of the defendant, ordinary people don't even know what a wad is. Doesn't that suggest that the culprit is someone familiar with shotguns?"

"I-I don't know anything about that."

"Now then, I'd like you to recall something. At first, you testified that you didn't hear any gunshots around midnight on the night of the incident, didn't you?"

"T-That's… yes, I did."

"However, at some point—specifically, after you learned that the police had turned their suspicion toward the defendant—you suddenly changed your testimony, saying you heard a gunshot around 12:30 AM. Why did you change your testimony? It's simple: around midnight, when Mr. Matsui testified that he heard a gunshot, you killed the victim with a shotgun, the sound of your shot drowned out by the thunderstorm. Yes, you planned it just like the defendant, taking the gun from the easily accessible gun locker.

That's why at first, you denied Mr. Matsui's testimony that he heard a gunshot at that time. You mistakenly thought he had heard the gunshot you fired.

But after talking with the police, you realized the gunshot he heard wasn't the one you fired. That's why you changed your testimony—to pin all the blame on the defendant. Isn't that right?"

"T-That's not true! I didn't do anything like that!"

"Let's move on to the next question. This is something I heard directly from the defendant: there was a time when you came to get him, saying the police wanted to see him, right?"

"W-What of it?"

"Until you came to get him, the defendant was in his room the whole time. And in front of your eyes, he left his room.

In other words, you were the only person who knew when the defendant had left his room and had the opportunity to throw the used cartridge case into the trash bin in his room. The blood found on the cartridge case probably came from removing the blood-soaked wad from the victim's body. Isn't that right?"

"T-That's enough! You can say anything you want, but if you're going to treat me like the culprit, then show me the evidence!"

Ignoring Takeshiba, I turned back to the judge.

"Your Honor, the defense has finished presenting all of its evidence. We have no more witnesses to question or exhibits to submit.

However, given what we've presented so far, I believe it's become clear that there were significant issues in this trial, which was brought forward as a murder case. Therefore, I would like to request that the trial be temporarily suspended and that the prosecution conduct a further investigation."

The courtroom was enveloped in silence.

Eventually, Prosecutor Horiuchi slowly turned to me with a creaking sound and said in a small voice,

"…Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious."

Honestly, the only evidence I had against Takeshiba was the circumstantial evidence I had just mentioned. However, I had pointed out a new suspect. From here on, I'd let Horiuchi have a chance to redeem himself, making my job easier in the process.

"What will you do, Prosecutor Horiuchi?" the judge asked.

"W-W-Well then, c-c-could we possibly extend the trial by three days… if that's alright?"

Perhaps due to the shock, Prosecutor Horiuchi, sounding like a robot with a missing screw, suggested such a delay.

"Very well. The trial will be postponed by three days."

The judge banged the gavel with an especially strong blow.

Suddenly, the courtroom erupted into chaos, like a hornet's nest being disturbed.

"M-Mr. Yamashika, is that really true, what you just said!?"

Even Amagi, who was sitting next to me, couldn't contain his excitement and asked.

"Yeah, what I just said is probably the truth. You're innocent. At least of the murder charge. What, aren't you happy?"

"W-Well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't happy, but I can't believe it! Because I saw my uncle's body move before I shot him!"

"Just because he was dead doesn't mean his body couldn't move at all. Didn't the White Pig doctor testify about that? When a person dies, various changes occur. The stiffness in the muscles can cause the body to move during that process. It's not that uncommon."

"I-I see… but still, such a coincidence…"

Amagi was so shocked that he was left speechless. Such a coincidence? Hmph, this kind of coincidence was just an everyday occurrence for me. After all, my clients needed to be like this.

At that moment,

"Excuse me, I'd like to take the defendant away now, if that's alright," a security officer came up to us and said.

Well, since he hadn't been acquitted yet, that request was understandable.

But then, glancing at the gallery, I decided to respond like this:

"No, I'll refuse that request for about ten minutes."

"Wha—What did you say!?"

The security officer's eyes widened, clearly not expecting to be refused.

"You don't have the right to refuse! This is obstructing the duties of a public official!"

"No, I'm firmly rejecting an unjust detention. You heard the trial just now, right? This guy is innocent. Since he's innocent, there's no reason for him to be detained."

"T-That's… b-but, well, the investigation is still ongoing, and there hasn't been a formal acquittal yet…"

"Stop babbling, I know that. I said I'd refuse for just ten minutes, right? I just want to let him talk to his family for a bit."

At those words, Amagi suddenly turned his head. He looked toward the gallery.

And then, he spotted them. His sister, accompanied by Yukina.

Alright then. I had no interest in the melodrama that will follow. My work was done, so I might as well head home.

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Epilogue

The trial was never resumed.

After that, the police re-examined the case under the assumption that the victim had been shot twice.

If they had just straightforwardly focused on Takeshiba, that would have been enough, but apparently, their pride was at stake. So, they re-investigated everyone who was at Oniyama's house that night. Of course, that included Amagi, because there was a possibility that the second shot had been fired as a cover-up.

And after all that effort, the police ended up arresting Takeshiba.

They investigated Takeshiba's surroundings and found the trash bag he had thrown out on the non-burnable garbage day, discovering the blood-soaked wad from Oniyama's body. This became the decisive evidence, and Takeshiba confessed, leading to his arrest.

To think they found the trash bag Takeshiba threw out among countless others—now that's what I call determination. Even I had to give the police some credit this time.

Actually, the police were still trying to charge Amagi with murder, stubbornly thinking that perhaps the victim was still alive when Takeshiba shot him, and Amagi's shot was the fatal blow.

But the victim had been shot in the heart with a shotgun. There was no doubt that he died instantly, which ironically proved that Amagi hadn't killed Oniyama.

The prosecution, still furious, tried to throw Amagi in jail on charges of desecrating a corpse, but I pressured—no, negotiated—by asking who would take responsibility for falsely accusing an innocent person of murder. As a result, we reached a deal that allowed Amagi to get off with a suspended sentence.

And so, the newspapers all reported my victory and the prosecution's defeat in bold headlines.

Yes, no matter what anyone said, this is how the trials I handled should go. Just imagining the look on Takeda's face as he watched my success was enough to make me feel good.

By the way, not that it mattered, but Amagi left Oniyama's house and started a new life with his sister. I couldn't care less about that client who didn't even bring in much money.

Finally, I finished all the miscellaneous tasks and returned to the peaceful days where I could once again slowly sip the tea Yukina made at the office.

"But really, Yukina, this time it was all thanks to you. I appreciate it."

"No, it's alright. I'm just glad I could help."

"No, without you this time, there was no way we would've won. Let me do something to thank you. Isn't there anything you want?"

"Oh no, you don’t need to thank me. I’m more than satisfied if I could be of service to you."

"Don’t be so modest. You’re always helping me out, so let me do something for you. Otherwise, I won’t feel right."

Yukina hesitated for a moment but then, after fidgeting a little, she said,

"Well, um, Mr. Zenko, there’s something I’d like to ask you."

"Sure, anything. Just name it."

"Uh… next Tuesday, do you have any plans?"

Next Tuesday—

December 24th.

Plans? Of course not. And even if I did, I’d cancel them.

But at that moment, overwhelmed with joy at Yukina’s request, I completely forgot one thing.

Yes, the curse from that meddlesome interference. And one more thing—the fact that, once again, I had nearly forgotten about the jinxed brat, who barely had any role to play this time either…

Afterword

Recently, it seems there was an event known as Golden Week happening in the world.

When you're living a life that's basically the same as being a shut-in every day, concepts like days of the week and seasons gradually start to fade away. However, when the world goes on a long holiday, I somehow start to feel a bit more festive myself.

But even though my mood changed, nothing else really did. In the end, I spent the whole event holed up at home, tirelessly collecting Destiny Stones, and working on top of that.

Writing it like this makes it sound like I'm just a plain old shut-in, so I want to strongly emphasize that I did have the option to go out, but I deliberately chose not to. Yes, that's right, during Golden Week, everywhere is packed with people and it's just exhausting. Therefore, I repeat, I deliberately chose not to go anywhere.

It's absolutely not because I'm antisocial, lazy, or because I don't have a girlfriend or anything like that.

So, when a certain single teacher tells me, "I went to a hot spring with a girl over Golden Week," it doesn't make me the least bit jealous. Not at all.

Seriously.

…Now then.

It's become quite warm lately, and I wonder how all of you, dear readers, have been doing.

Thank you very much for picking up my humble work and reading it all the way to the end once again.

That being said, I must first offer my apologies this time.

In the afterword of the previous volume, I mentioned that I would be writing about a civil lawsuit arc. However, after considerable deliberation, I concluded that it would be difficult to develop it as part of the Tactical series, so for the time being, I will continue with the criminal lawsuit arc. I sincerely apologize to everyone who was looking forward to the civil lawsuit arc.

That said, the civil lawsuit arc is by no means a scrapped project. I have been conducting various research and preparations, and I hope to present it in some form in the near future, so I would be grateful for your patience.

As for the future of the Tactical series, fortunately, I still have some ideas left, and as I write the next story, more ideas may come to mind, so it seems I can continue for a little while longer.

With that being the case, I would be delighted if we could meet again in the next volume, where good ol' Yamashika is scheduled to face his greatest peril.

Until then.

Toru Shiwasu

Acknowledgments and Additional Notes

In the course of writing this book, when researching shotguns, I received invaluable assistance from Mr. B, a former military officer, and from Mr. U at a certain gun shop in S Prefecture. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude.

In particular, at Mr. U's gun shop, not only did they guide me through the process of obtaining a shotgun license, from how to fill out the paperwork to various tips for the required exams, but they also shared valuable insights into criminal cases involving shotguns. I would like to once again extend my sincere thanks.

Additionally, regarding a certain drug used in this book, I tried it myself and found that it actually works quite well, so it might be worth recommending to those who have trouble falling asleep. However, I've also heard that it can disrupt the balance between non-REM and REM sleep for some people, so I advise anyone interested to be cautious when using it.